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X-Blade

SIDE:

Black

White

講談社 BOX





講談社 定価：本体**1400**円(税別)

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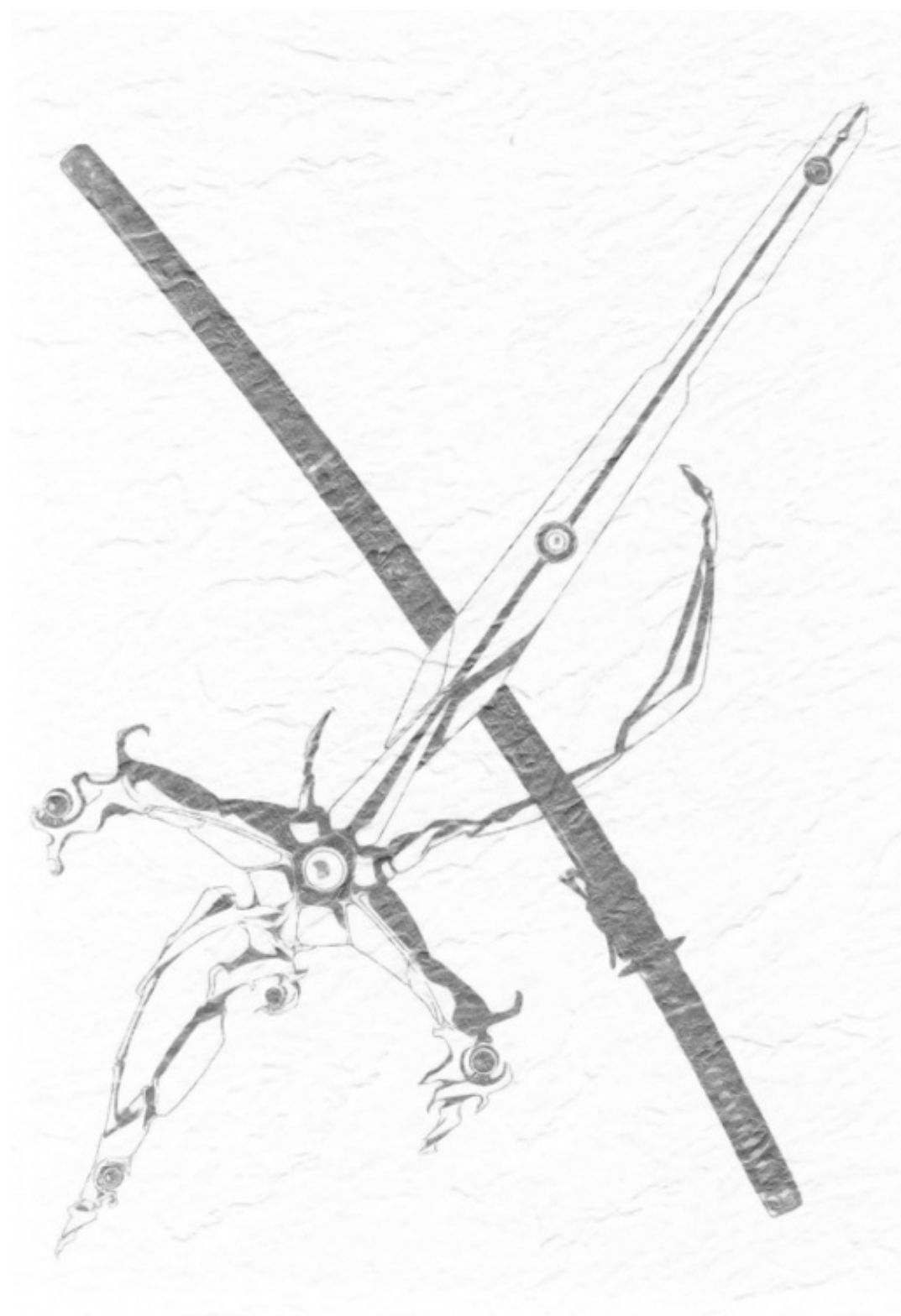


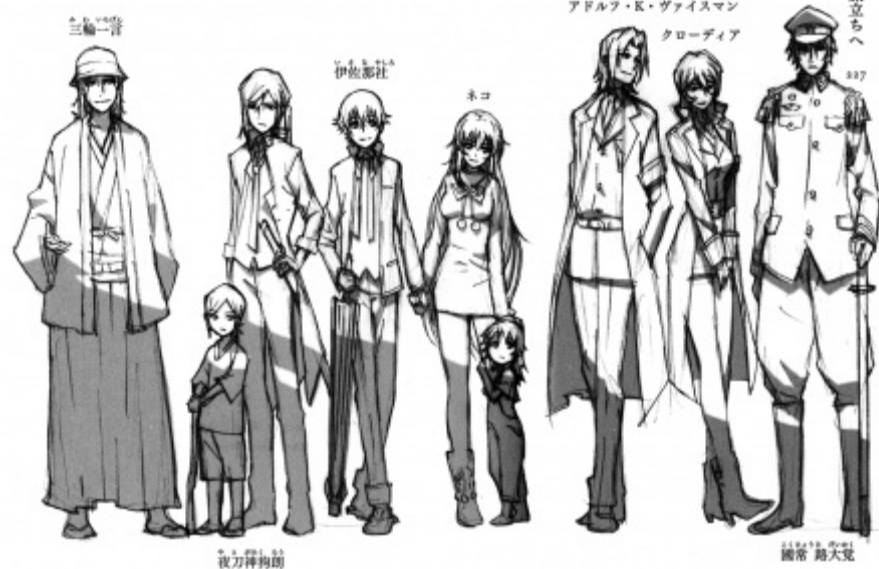
『K SIDE:BLACK&WHITE』

Illustration 鈴木信吾 (GoHands)

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(NOT FOR SALE)





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Prologue: On the Run

The walls were papered in pink, and the bed—an unabashed heart-shaped mattress for two. While it looked to be rather well kept, the interior decoration left a sense of cheapness.

“Whew!” Isana Yashiro languidly flopped down on the bed and began unbuttoning his collar. “Kinda feels like this place is worlds away from where we’re from...”

It was his first time stepping into a place like this. To use a rather dated expression, they’d arrived at a “lovers’ rendezvous spot”. More bluntly, though, it was merely a love hotel.

It was nigh impossible to avoid the sense of curiosity aroused by the disco ball hanging from the ceiling and the refrigerator decorated in popping colors with stars. But Yashiro was too exhausted to give in to his usual curiosity at this point.

“Shiro! Shiro!” Neko piped up, poking her head out of the washroom, visible only from the collarbone up. “You sure you don’t wanna take a bath together?” Apparently she’d already disrobed of all she’d been wearing and had now returned to the state in which the pair had first met. In other words—butt naked.

Yashiro lifted only his head. “Neko—what did you just promise me?”

“Mmmr...” Neko pursed her lips. “I won’t flagrantly show men my naked body.”

“Exactly. Now, off with you,” he ordered with a tired smile, letting his head fall again to rest against the mattress.

A loud thump echoed from the bathroom, and Neko returned, obviously dissatisfied, “You’re no fun! I just wanna splish and splash in the water with Shiro!” and ducked her head back inside.

Only moments before, she’d started eagerly stripping her clothes off right in front of their eyes, and Yashiro had been in quite a state. He’d somehow managed to convince her to stop, unwilling though she might have been, and steered her into the washroom alone—a feat which had nearly sapped him of all strength. Now, however, a pleasant humming drifted into the room proper, along with the sound of the shower turning on.

Neko was very fair-skinned, with curves in all the right places and rather pleasing proportions. No man could possibly resist her allure. She was probably doing all sorts of things right now that would make any guy jealous...

Yashiro closed his eyes with a bitter smile; he really would’ve liked to just slip off to sleep just like this—but he still had some unfinished business. He still—

“There’s no end to her indecency!” snapped Yatogami Kuroh, who’d been sitting, arms and legs crossed, on the sofa this whole time and seemed quite put-out. “And what sort of unseemly establishment have you brought us to?!” At wits’ end, he stood with his hands fisted at his sides, and Isana Yashiro softened the bitter smile that rose to his lips at this. “Why on earth are we hiding in this—this—this—” Kuroh didn’t seem able to even bring himself to say the words love hotel, and with flushed cheeks, he continued, “—this getaway house for men and

women to engage in relations?!”

Each and every word that fell from Kuroh’s lips made him sound aged beyond his years, and with a grunt of effort, Yashiro hoisted himself upright, settling back against the head of the bed as he chuckled.

“But it’s perfect as a hideout, don’t you think? Everything’s anonymous, so it’s a great space for maintaining privacy. Or rather—it’s the only space in the city you can do so. Not like they can ask for ID from each and every person who comes through here, after all. It’s perfect for people like us who need a place to lie low away from the public eye.”

“But what I’m trying to say is—” the ever-fastidious Kuroh barked back, “—is that this place is morally abhorrent!”

“Well...I suppose you have a point.” Yashiro thought of his friend Mishina here, and a dirty smile flickered across his features. Were he here, he’d likely make light of the situation. “But people come here to do what they need to, as it were, so you can hardly expect it to be the pinnacle of morality.”

“That’s not it!” Kuroh shook his head insistently, flushing deeply once again. “I—I’m not chastising those who...choose to engage in such acts. Sexual relations between consenting partners are far from the sort of thing that ought to be frowned upon. What I take issue with is this hotel’s business sense! Which is to say—we were able to just walk right inside!”

The hotel they occupied used a fully automated payment system, enabling customers to make use of the rooms without once encountering another person.

At Yashiro's look of obvious confusion, Kuroh clarified with irritation, "All three of us—clearly one more than a pair!"

"Oh... Right, I see now."

Security cameras had been guarding the hotel entrance, in all likelihood checked on the other end by the building's owners. Fully automated though the system may have been, there was no way that there wouldn't at least be a building manager around—and while they'd used subtle disguises and Neko's powers to conceal their identities, wary of capture by Scepter 4, they hadn't thought to consider their number.

"Well, I suppose that sort of thing isn't all that rare in this sort of place—two guys and one girl, that is."

"Utterly indecent!"

"Wonder what sorts of things they get up to~?" At Yashiro's teasing laughter, Kuroh turned a sharp glare his way—and it was at that point that a sing-song voice called out from the washroom.

"Heeeey, Shiro! There's some weird kind of button here! Lookie lookie!"

The pair turned their gaze toward her voice—and suddenly the walls turned completely transparent, offering an unobstructed view of the washroom. Neko, covered in bubbles, smiled over at them broadly.

"Lookie lookie!" As she pressed the button beside the shower off and on, the pair were in turn granted and denied the sight of Neko bare as the day she was born. It seemed she'd found a rather naughty system allowing viewers to see

inside the bathroom. “Whee~!” Her enjoyment seeming to have peaked, she pirouetted on tiptoes, her long hair just barely concealing her more ‘dangerous’ bits.

Kuroh and Yashiro raised their voices as one: “Stop, stop!” “Cease that this instant!”

“Nya~?” She halted her twirling with a jerk of her hips, and the wall went back to normal.

After chasing down the man known as the Silver King, Adolf K. Weissman, and getting caught up in the explosion of his airship, the trio narrowly escaped certain doom. Had it not been for Kuroh’s split-second decision and supernatural abilities, they likely all three would have lost their lives then and there.

Kuroh pushed the helicopter he was piloting into a nosedive, managing to avoid taking the blast directly. As he put it, “Helicopters are typically equipped with a clutch to prevent them from diving even if the engine stops; as such, should a pilot find himself in that situation, he’d typically just reduce the pitch of the main rotor, but the PELL402 has the same pitch function as operation choppers and the like, so I was able to bring it into a dive faster than in a freefall.”

Yashiro gaped in surprise. “...I’m shocked enough that you can fly a helicopter at all—where’d you learn that sort of thing?”

At his question, Kuroh replied cryptically, “It’s expected for a retainer serving

Ichigen-sama.” But Kuroh wasn’t finished yet—and with Yashiro and Neko held close, he warped the space around the trio using his powers and fled the out-of-control helicopter.

‘If it weren’t for him...’ Yashiro mused, ‘We’d likely all three have been burnt to a crisp...’ He then added a bit self-deprecatingly, ‘But...maybe I would’ve made it, at least. I managed to survive a fall from that airship, after all...’

The sound of hissing wind

The airship’s hatch opening

The Silver King Weissman looking down at him and laughing lightly—

“Bye~”

—before he kicked Yashiro away, starting his freefall to earth

Neko’s powers had triggered something within him, and while he could recall nothing else, he’d held a strong grip on that memory at least, that sensation of feeling helpless, as if his soul had fled his body.

Why had he been on board the Silver King’s ship?

How had he survived a fall from the sky strong enough to send him hurtling through the roof of a building?

What was he?

To solve this riddle, they’d stirred up the Blue King, Munakata Reishi, and tried to obtain direct audience with the Silver King—but in the end, things had wound up even murkier than before.

‘As for that explosion, though... I can’t bring myself to think that someone as amazing as that man would die so easily.’

Had the Silver King...triggered the explosion himself?

The one being ranking alongside the Gold King—the very first King...

What sort of relationship did the Silver King and Yashiro have...? The way he’d looked at Yashiro had been filled with a joy bordering on ecstasy that drew goosebumps. His heart throbbed painfully in his chest, and his body trembled slightly.

“...What’s wrong?” Kuroh seemed to have notice the subtle change that had come over Yashiro.

“Oh—ah, it’s...nothing.” He offered a smile in return. ‘He’s always so kind, Kuroh...’ He raked his gaze over the boy who’d somehow become something of a partner and companion along the way. Accomplished with the sword as well as a kitchen knife, excelling in all areas of domestic upkeep, he’d been blessed with an honest, sincere personality. ‘Though I have to admit he’d be a little easier to get along with if he’d just let loose a tiny bit more...’ he thought to himself.

Despite trying to kill Yashiro when they’d first met, they now found relatively little difficulty in having casual conversations with one another. He’d even shifted from calling him the stiff ‘Isana Yashiro’ to simply ‘Shiro’ and softened his speech as well. It was difficult to tell if he was skilled at adapting to situations or if he simply just found himself getting swept along by the current—

Kuroh furrowed his brows. “So? What are we to do now?” Somewhere along the way, Yashiro had found himself the leader of their quirky trio, a fact which Kuroh seemed to have taken no issue with.

Yashiro returned with some concern, “Well...I guess I was thinking we could rest here for a bit and wait for nightfall?”

“.....” Kuroh seemed to have something to say on this point, but bit back his words.

“It’s the only choice we have when you think about it. We just don’t have enough information right now to make our next move—like how that Munakata-san is going to proceed, or what happened to the Silver King when his airship exploded. If we don’t take stock of how things unfold from here on out, we can’t decide what to do next.

“.....”

“So I guess you could say we’re using the TV here and your PDA to gather intelligence?”

At Yashiro’s chuckled suggestion, Kuroh nodded reluctantly. “Very well then.”

“And also—” Yashiro added, expression a bit tired, “to tell the truth, I’m pretty pooped here. If I don’t get some sleep, I won’t be able to move.” With that, he rolled back onto his side on the mattress—before extending a frail hand out to Kuroh. “You must be tired, Patrasche. I am, too. I feel really really tired for some reason...”

“Who are you calling Patrasche?!” After delivering this frank response,

though, Kuroh's expression turned anxious. He brought his face a bit closer to Yashiro's, as if he were inspecting the freshness of vegetables at a market. "...I'll admit, you don't look too good right now. Your eyes are bloodshot." His voice dropped in tone. "Oi, Shiro. Are you positive this is only because you're tired? Or is it—"

Yashiro just laughed—he wasn't even sure himself. Ever since Neko's powers had triggered the unlocking of his memories, he'd started feeling some strange sort of disconnect between his body and mind well up within him. Whether it was simple exhaustion...or some sort of omen—Yashiro couldn't tell. As such, he responded thusly: "Mm, I think I'll just try napping for now."

If he didn't try sleeping, he'd never know one way or the other.

"...All right, then," he returned, expression serious, and promptly sat himself down on the edge of the bed, back to Yashiro, and crossed his arms over his chest.



“.....” Yashiro simply stared at him, eyes wide. “Umm, this is...?”

“I’ll watch over you, so you can sleep without worry.”

“...Okay.” Ah, so that was it. His eyes crinkled at their edges. “...You’re really kind, you know.”

Kuroh’s shoulders twitched, and his next words carried an edge of anger to

them. “We can’t make our next move without you at full strength! Now stop babbling and get to sleep! If you don’t–” He turned his attention to Neko’s humming filtering in from the bathroom, “–things are bound to get loud again once she gets out of there.”

Yashiro gave a dry laugh. It seemed that Neko had found the bath salts and been playing in the bubbles during her bath. She was a strange girl, and her past was a mystery—but it was clear she enjoyed her baths.

“You have a point... I suppose I’ll take you up on your offer, then...” He pulled the blanket up around his shoulders and curled himself up a bit. Kuroh muttered something to himself, and Yashiro turned to ask, “Hey...what kind of a person was Ichigen-sama?”

Kuroh froze in place. “Why...would you ask something like that?”

“Just curious, I guess.” Fatigue had started to work its way into his voice, and he continued around a soft yawn, “I mean, you can do all kinds of things. Cooking and sewing—and then flying helicopters and stuff like that. So I just thought maybe Ichigen-sama was a really amazing person as well.”

“.....”

Kuroh fell silent, his arms crossed, not stirring an inch. Watching him, Yashiro idly thought, ‘And he’ll probably still be sitting just like that when I wake in another few hours.’

He came off a bit irritated, but at the same time held a sense of reliability, steady as a rock, and Yashiro snickered softly to himself as he nodded off.

“Ichigen-sama was...”

But the tale Kuroh began to relate...was lost somewhere between dream and reality.

Chapter 1: Bound Together

Eleven-year-old Yatogami Kuroh stood frozen stiff in the kitchen.

“Oh no...I’ve messed up the recipe...!”

Today’s dinner was to be fried chives omelet with dried mackerel, tofu, and onion miso soup. He’d gone through the menu in his head on the way home from school before making up his mind. He’d even recently worked out a way to conduct simulations in his mind for how he’d use the contents of the refrigerator.

Each meal was different; he couldn’t simply grill or stew the ingredients—he had to carefully fold in the eggs, be diligent in adding seasoning. As such, a rather marked difference arose in the final results between meals he’d imagined ahead of time clearly in his head and those he hadn’t. He’d picture the final product in his head, working out the particulars he knew he’d need to achieve such an end. He’d thought through everything—from measuring out into a small bowl the seasonings he would need ahead of time to preparing the vegetables he’d need later in a separate container.

And admittedly, these sorts of preparatory motions were really part of the basic skills set endowed to anyone who called themselves a cook, but to Kuroh, this had been a rather important discovery indeed. He’d been hoping to, in this way, somehow overcome his innate clumsiness, but...

“Hng...how could I...?!”

The chives he'd placed on his cutting board...were completely useless now. He'd checked just yesterday and thought they were still fresh, but looking them over now, they were clearly rotting along the ends, nearly melting onto the board and emitting a foul odor. This was one of the worst parts of the rainy season—stored in the refrigerator though they may have been, it was obvious he still couldn't let his guard down.

“Ngh...” Now what to do? He'd had the perfect fried chive omelet pictured in his head—the very same one that his guardian Miwa Ichigen had prepared and taught him only two weeks prior.

“Understand, Kuro? First you slice the chives, then sauté them in sesame oil.”

Ichigen's movements and explanation had been so quick that it had been all Kuroh could do simply to take notes. The man had moved smoothly about the kitchen, explaining, “As for me—I like topping it off with a bit of sweet bean paste, but the key is to use not vinegar, but ponzu. That way it comes out even milder.”

Kuroh had nodded his assent, never taking his eyes off of Ichigen's hands so as not to miss a move he made. The knife seemed to dance in his hands as he sliced away at the chives, and even setting aside the fact that Kuroh was particularly partial to those hands, one could say without bias that his movements were beautiful and captivating.

His fingers were long and slender for a man, endowed with an elegant flexibility that likened him to a concert pianist. They were clearly the hands of an artist, Kuroh reflected mentally, spending the entire time admiring the hands

from a point of view having little to nothing to do with cooking.

And of course, his meals always turned out fantastic.

Kuroh had entered the kitchen today intent on recreating the chive dish he'd been taught that day, but the star of the dish was now utterly useless. And it was this worry that kept Kuroh from realizing something: that the mackerel he'd been grilling while all of this was going on was starting to burn.

At this rate, the entire meal was going to be ruined. But just as he began to give way to despair in his moment of need, a form stepped up beside Kuroh—one with dark hair in some degree of disarray and a smile that seemed to never leave his features, draped in casual clothing.

The man reached forward to douse the flame heating the grill for the fish and, tilting his head to the side slightly, offered, “Would you like some help, Kuro?” His voice was gentle.

“I—Ichigen-sama!”

Indeed, it was the master of this household, Miwa Ichigen. He flicked a glance at the wilting chives. “Oh dear, those chives do seem to be in a rather sad state...” He sighed. “While I do enjoy the rainy season, given that it gives me time to catch up on my reading, it does make it a bit difficult to go on my walks and dream up verses for my haiku, and then there's this business with making it easier for food to go rotten...” He turned to the refrigerator, inspecting the vegetable compartment. “Hmm, but this season does seem to put you in better spirits than usual. Shall we?”

He pulled out a tomato from the drawer, and here they entered a realm in which Miwa Ichigen stood unchallenged. With speed too quick for the eye to follow, he proceeded to slice up the tomato, tossing it into the fry pan glaze with sesame oil, and in a flash he'd sautéed it with salt and pepper. Only a moment later, he'd retrieved the slices from the pan and replaced them with the egg-and-mayonnaise mixture, adding the tomatoes once again after the eggs started to fluff up.

“Th—this is...” Kuroh’s expression reflected vividly how overwhelmed he felt by the display. “You followed...the exact same recipe as that for the chive omelet?”

“Hm?” He tossed an easy smile Kuroh’s way. “That’s right. We couldn’t use the chives, after all, so I just tried using the tomatoes instead. The flavor profile’s quite different, but I think it’s turned out splendidly.”

At the same time, he was preparing a dish of Chinese-style sweet bean paste, drizzling the result over the tomato-and-egg concoction. It was a dish which aroused one’s appetite with a single glance. Ichigen then proceeded to delicately slice the only slightly burned mackerel with the tips of his chopsticks and dressed the fish with a cucumber and seaweed vinaigrette, finishing the dish in the blink of an eye. Kuroh could only stand back and stare in wonder.

‘What unfettered versatility...!’ Eleven years of age though he might have been, this was the sort of vocabulary one developed sharing a roof with the haiku poet Miwa Ichigen. Steeling himself, Kuroh asked, “How...? How are you able to so freely manipulate the ingredients like that...?”

Ichigen paused a moment in reflection before responding, “Hmm, I guess you could say...I can hear the ingredients’ voices? I simply listen carefully and pay close attention to how the tomatoes, the chives, the eggs, the mackerel want to be handled.” Kuroh fell silent at this. “Food can speak to you, you have but to brush it with your fingertips, or inhale its scent. Food knows how it should be prepared.” He was neither joking nor bluffing nor spouting alcohol-driven nonsense. The current Seventh King was quite serious. He added with a grin, wiping his hands on a cloth, “And it’s happy to tell us as such.”

The average person would probably, at this point, reply to such fanciful rhetoric with, “...What the hell are you talking about?” But not Yatogami Kuroh.

“.....” His eyes sparkling, he gave a great nod, as he always did. “As expected of you, Ichigen-sama! I understand perfectly now!” They were quite a well-suited master-disciple pair indeed.

As they sat around the dinner table, Kuroh once again expressed his admiration. “The meal is delicious, Ichigen-sama!”

“I see—that’s wonderful to hear,” Ichigen smiled, wielding his chopsticks with refined movements. The 10-mat living room had only a single low-set dining table, and while it lacked a television or air-conditioning unit, it held a large clock hung on the wall as well as a vacuum-tube radio.

The window opening out onto the veranda was flung open, letting a cool evening breeze flow through. The drops of rain from earlier had long since stopped, and clouds floated lazily across the madder red sky.

“But...I feel a bit disappointed.” Kuroh dropped his shoulders slightly as he moved his chopsticks around. “I need to be able to prepare this sort of thing properly myself—and yet I still rely on your help in the kitchen.” He turned to face Ichigen once more and dropped his head. “I deeply apologize.” It was a very boyish, refreshing move.

“.....” Ichigen’s expression grew complicated. “You know, about that, Kuro...”

Kuroh’s head whipped up, eyes glittering. “Yes??”

“I’m was thrilled, of course, that you thought to prepare our meal, but—how can I put this... Don’t you think it falls a bit outside the category of general chores about the home?” Kuroh blinked a few times in shock, and Ichigen struggled for proper phrasing. “You see, while I might not be in the best of health, I can at least handle a bit of housework.”

“Of course! There’s nothing you can’t do! If you wanted to, you could even become an astronaut, or Prime Minister, I’m sure of it!”

“Thank you.” He smiled at the words of his ever-straightforward pupil. “It warms my heart to hear you say such things.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Wait—that’s not what I was getting at. What I mean to say is—I feel bad asking you to take care of all of the household chores. You even go so far as to address me using the -sama honorific, and I must confess it’s a bit embarrassing.”

Kuroh tilted his head in confusion. His features were refined, setting him apart

from the rank and file around him and ensuring that he would grow into quite the beauty with age, with eyes larger than those of any of the other children in the village. It had already been more than four years since the boy had come to live with him, and yet he still retained this sense of stiff formality. Quite the contrary—it may well have become even stronger with the departure of the elder students from their house.

“But, Ichigen-sama...” Kuroh began. “Didn’t you mention before that you cared for your grandfather like this as a child?”

“Oh, that was...” Ichigen paused, cutting himself off. “Mm, well that was a special case. Remember what I said? For generations, my family has run the Miwa Meijin School of traditional swordsmanship, and my exceedingly strict grandfather disciplined me to do as such. That’s not how things work in this day and age, though.”

As he related his tale with warm tones, though, he became aware that his words held no persuasive power, and sure enough, Kuroh announced with a broad smile, “Then I’d like to be raised in the same manner! I want to be just like you when I grow up, after all, Ichigen-sama!”

“Ngh...”

Kuroh continued merrily, “Ichigen-sama, caring for you makes me happier than anything else!”

Ichigen brought a bite of food to his mouth, not quite sure what he’d gotten himself into. “Hmm...” At this point, it was difficult to turn the boy down, even

though he'd actually been raised in a much stricter household.

Kuroh added, "Ichigen-sama—please tell me more about what life was like when you were a child!"

"When I was a child? That hardly makes for a decent story."

"I want to know anything and everything about you!" Kuroh's eyes shone with the innocence of a boy who believed from the bottom of his heart that he was gazing upon a true hero, and Ichigen's expression softened.

"Let's see then... How about I tell you about my grandfather? He was a truly accomplished swordsman indeed. I even heard that he learned to wield a blade under the tutelage of Okita Souji of the Shinsengumi. Not that I put much stock in that legend, though."

Kuroh let himself be swept away by the story as Ichigen began to chatter cheerfully. They had no television, lived in a tiny rural village deep in the mountains with no sources of entertainment, but they without a doubt found time to enjoy themselves to their hearts' content.

Yatogami Kuroh admittedly didn't know all that much about the past of the man known as Miwa Ichigen. He knew that Ichigen had been raised in the Miwa Meijin School dojo, that he'd learned the sword at the hand of his strict grandfather, and that he'd had everything from classical martial arts to spearmanship, Chinese classical literature and ancient writings, etiquette, and even horsemanship—as well as how to survive alone in the mountains rigorously pounded into him. Once he'd graduated high school, he left his parents' home

and entered Japan's top educational institution. He'd studied economics, and after receiving a scholarship, traveled to America, where he'd earned a degree in business administration and gone on to be employed at one of the top brokerage firms on the planet. There as well he performed remarkably well, but faced with his declining health, he'd at last returned to Japan. Now he rested on the laurels of a successful life, living a peaceful life of leisure.

That was about the limit of what Kuroh knew of his master's past, but he still understood a great deal about the man beyond his schooling and career: like how kind he was. How strong. How grand. How he despised insects and hung mosquito nets around their home far earlier than anyone else but could seldom bring himself to slap away the insects that bit him, loath to take a life.

One winter, when the snow had been piled so high that cars couldn't even make their way along the streets, he'd carried an elderly neighbor complaining of a stomachache on his own back through the snow to the general hospital two mountains away. Their neighbors often came to him for advice, lovingly referring to him with a respectful Miwa-sensei.

The peaceful expression he wore during his reading, the serious mien he adopted when penning haiku, the childlike, carefree way in which he laughed, and the terrifying frigidity he radiated in his rare moments of true anger.

Kuroh had seen all of these sides to Miwa Ichigen in their four years together—in all likelihood, more than anyone else.

"I'd really like to have been able to meet him one day," Kuroh spoke as Ichigen finished speaking of his grandfather, and Ichigen returned a weak smile.

“Yes, it might have been nice—but as I said, he passed away when I was in high school.”

“.....” Kuroh was sharper than most 11-year-olds. Ichigen had, in all likelihood, been raised to succeed his family in running the Miwa Meijin School—and yet here he was now, living apart from his family, hidden away deep within the mountains. He didn’t seem to have any contact with any relatives, and likely there was a lot of history there that he hadn’t shared with Kuroh. It likely had a great deal to do with his grandfather’s death.

But Kuroh was patient; if Ichigen would not speak of these things, then he wouldn’t ask about them. He grinned around a laugh, “I really like hearing about the past!”

Ichigen offered a bitter smile in return. “I suppose his stories would have appealed to you. I certainly heard enough of them myself to grow tired of them.”

“Ichigen-sama, you...” He dared a glance at Ichigen’s expression. “...really loved your grandfather, didn’t you?”

Ichigen chuckled. “Mm, yes.” There was no hesitation in his response. “He was certainly strict...but I truly cared for him very deeply.” Hearing these words somehow thrilled Kuroh—but his shoulders drooped a bit when Ichigen continued, “But...I think that even if he hadn’t died when he did, we would have eventually parted ways, as so often happens with time.”

“.....”

“I’m sure that you as well will one day leave this house.” His expression was soft and peaceful as he spoke these words, delivered with assurance and a quiet understanding...and a strange sense of hope.

Kuroh, however, was not yet old enough to be able to parse the deep meaning imbued in these words, and he returned in an almost angry tone, “I’ll never leave this place!”

There were several reasons behind his sharp delivery, and staring at Kuroh in shock, Ichigen was reminded once again that while this boy could use rather difficult language at times, he was still a child, not even out of middle school yet, and he laughed bitterly. “Mm, perhaps, but—” He attempted to divert the subject in an effort to soothe Kuroh’s anxiety. “—well, you’ll need to set out on your own once you take a bride, right? Wouldn’t it feel a bit awkward living here at that point? I’m sure your wife wouldn’t like me as a father-in-law either.” Kuroh flushed deeply at this, and Ichigen added with a gentle smile, “Or do you perhaps not need a bride?”

Kuroh stared down at the ground for a moment before giving his head a tiny shake. “No.” He then snapped his head up and continued, “Wait! Then I’ll just make sure to marry someone who wants to live with you! I’m sure it won’t be difficult at all! I’m sure they’ll love you just as much as me!” He seemed utterly convinced with this plan, fists clenched at his sides and expression bright, as if there were no other logical choice.

Ichigen stared at him blankly for a few moments, before at length returning with a soft chuckle, “Yes, I suppose so. I’m sure whoever decides to become

one with you will be someone big-hearted and bright, who marches to the beat of their own drum.”

“Wh—wh-what do you mean by that? Ichigen-sama...?” Kuroh couldn’t tell if he was simply being teased, or if Ichigen was truly revealing his future to him, glancing at Ichigen with downcast eyes.

Ichigen laughed to the point of tears at this, reaching over to rub Kuroh’s head. “Thank you, Kuro,” he returned, not elaborating beyond these words.

The pair cleared away the dishes and took turns taking their baths before bidding each other good night and heading to their rooms. They weren’t connected by blood, and years separated them in age—and while they had managed to build a foundation of trust between themselves over the span of four years...

“I’ll have breakfast ready at 7 AM on the dot! I promise I won’t mess up this time!” Kuroh assured, spine stiff and straight. He bowed his head low, “Well then, good night, Ichigen-sama!” And with that, he returned to his own room. His stiffness and almost martial manner were decidedly out of place in a child this day and age.

Ichigen slid his hands into the sleeves of his kimono, muttering to himself with a soft, dry chuckle, “Good night to you as well, Kuro. But try not to overwork yourself.” Perhaps this was an aspect to his personality he’d been born with. ‘Maybe he was a warrior in a former life...?’ he thought, in truth half seriously despite his refined upbringing and great deal of education.

He muttered to himself, “So a warrior...Seems to have been reborn as...My Kuro-kun, huh...” An attempt at haiku, here. Had Kuroh been witness to this, he likely would’ve delivered a thorough round of applause, eyes bright. Ichigen rubbed his neck. “Hmm, not quite... Maybe not ‘So a warrior’ but ‘A warrior has’...?” With this, he leisurely wandered back to his own room.

Miwa Ichigen and Yatogami Kuroh were master and disciple—but they were also linked by something even stronger. Something unique, tangible—a bond which linked their very beings. For Kuroh, their relationship felt far more precious than merely that of master and disciple, akin to a compact between souls. However, as he had no real reason to feel this way and given that Ichigen didn’t like him using such terminology, he never said as such aloud—but it did nothing to diminish the fact that he truly felt that way.

Master, my Master. Miwa Ichigen.

Former analyst for a brokerage firm.

The last remaining master of the art of traditional swordsmanship as dictated by the Miwa Meijin School.

Self-styled avant-garde haiku poet.

One of the seven Kings chosen by the Dresden slate. The seventh King—the Colorless King.

And Yatogami Kuroh was vassal to that King, his clansman.

The next morning, Kuroh headed out into the garden to practice swinging his wooden sword. Wrapping himself up in the white padded undershirt Ichigen

had hand-sewn for him, he padded out onto the chilled ground barefoot. Night had not yet fully given way to dawn, and the pale orange light of daybreak scattered out about him.

“Whoo! Whoo!”

As he swang the wooden sword up and down a hundred times or so, being sure to adopt the form Ichigen had taught him, a drop of sweat began to bead on his chin.

“Whoo! Whoo!”

He always conducted these drills on the basics of swordsmanship before preparing breakfast—this was Kuroh’s daily routine. No matter the heat of summer nor chill of winter, he never deviated from this path, and he made it a point to continue these drills until he could feel the atmosphere around him blending in with his own person.

“All right!” He felt satisfied now, and after adjusting his posture and breathing, he gently set aside the wooden sword and took up the hand towel he’d draped over the bamboo railing, wiping away his sweat. Ichigen had only just recently praised him for finally managing to perfect his forms, and Kuroh’s cheeks puffed up a bit with pride as he remembered this—but he immediately chided himself, ‘No, I must discipline myself even further!’

You could perhaps say that this manner of focusing his energies was part of what made Kuroh Kuroh. After all, he still wound up getting soundly thrashed in the face of speed he couldn’t even follow whenever he squared off with

Ichigen in practice matches. Yet while Kuroh always wielded his wooden practice sword in these matches, Ichigen would at times fight with a rolled up newspaper, and others with perhaps a piece of styrofoam—and even when smacked with these unconventional materials, Kuroh somehow still managed to be blown some two or three meters away. All that—without once using his powers. It appeared to simply be a matter of attaining the right timing and tempo.

“.....” Kuroh sank into thought for a moment before deciding he’d try that again today.

He cast his glance about the garden, searching for a target: old persimmon and camellia trees, a hedge blossoming with purple hydrangeas, a stone lantern, a pond which was home to a toad that Kuroh had no idea the age of.

“Meow~”

Just then, a cat slunk lazily toward Kuroh from the veranda. He thought at first it was hoping for a bit of attention and petting, but it slipped right through his legs before leaping up onto one of the garden stones and setting about calmly licking its fur.

The aloof air it gave off as it glanced Kuroh’s way was nigh on hateful—and Kuroh smiled bitterly. This was the tomcat that had taken up residence recently in the neighborhood. He hadn’t a clue where it had come from, but it looked rather long in the tooth, and Ichigen had taken to calling it “Tamagorou” for some reason.

‘I doubt I could try it out on that cat...’ he said to himself. He understood intuitively that his powers weren’t the dangerous sort with which he could lay waste by flame to his surroundings or slice an opponent to pieces with a vacuum, and had received similar assurances from Ichigen, his King, as well. But this didn’t still his hesitation to attempt to take on another living being in this manner.

It was simply that—Kuroh himself still hadn’t the faintest clue as to just how his powers as a clansman of the Seventh King would manifest.

His gaze fell on the plastic watering can he used about the garden. It could probably handle a few scrapes if Kuroh messed up...

He squared his shoulders and took a deep breath—before clapping his hands together tightly. He pinched his eyes shut tight as if meditating and forced his heart and mind to calm.

‘Focus...’ he reminded himself. He could feel waves filling him up, all the way to his fingertips—a sensation he’d long since grown accustomed to. Four years ago, he’d only been able to faintly perceive it, but now he could clearly sense it. Putting it figuratively, it was like there was an invisible pool at the base of his core, with little particles of light bubbling up from it. It felt a bit ticklish... and so very warm.

For good reason: because at that very moment, he was connected to the very root of the Colorless King, Miwa Ichigen’s soul. He could feel Ichigen’s strongly shining vibrations resonating within himself—and it imbued in Kuroh boundless courage, cheering him.

He had but one mission: focus his energies on that sensation to the best of his abilities, and then—

‘Release!’ His eyes snapped open, and fixing his focus on the watering can he was targeting, he released the image of his power in a great explosion—

However...

Poof! came a dry sound, and the camellia branches on the tree in the completely opposite direction wavered a bit before two, three leaves fluttered to the ground. After perking up for a moment at the sound, the cat turned an almost snide gaze on Kuroh before returning to cleaning itself. The toad guarding the pond seemed to have hopped away, likely in response to the expanding circle of waves in its territory.

“Another failure...” Kuroh’s shoulders slumped in disappointment and his expression turned crestfallen as he sighed to himself. Despite the slow but steady progress he was making with his sword under Ichigen’s tutelage, he’d not once been able to successfully wield the powers granted him as a clansman of the Seventh King in their four years together, and this failure cast a dark shadow over Kuroh’s heart.

‘I really am just useless...’ He hated how awkward he could be. It was as if he was rejecting this bond with his Ichigen, the person most precious to him, and with each failure, he grew more and more dejected. Ichigen had warned him of the dangers of simply attaining knowledge and promised to explain all about the system of Kings once he learned to master using his abilities properly, but when could he hope for that to happen now...? What if...it never happened?

He brushed off these concerns, though, and trudged back inside.

Kuroh's guardian, Miwa Ichigen, had been watching the entire affair from a second-floor window. 'Well, I'm afraid this at least is all up to you. It's difficult to put into words, after all.' He crinkled his eyes and smiled a bit concernedly. 'Even I can't explain it all that well.'

He quietly let the curtains fall shut before returning to his room; he had to pretend to have been sleeping all the while until Kuroh came to summon him for breakfast, after all. "I suppose you've no choice but to learn the hard way—by falling down and picking yourself back up. Hang in there, Kuro," he whispered softly to himself.

The village Kuroh and Ichigen called home lay in the valley between two mountains in a prefecture and boasted a population of some 200. Getting to the nearest station required spending some 30 minutes being jostled to and fro on a bus. While they had no convenience stores, they did have one general store that sold just about anything you could want.

The elementary and middle schools were located on the same premises, and all children in the village attended. Though—"all" constituted barely 10 in total. While summers were bearable, the snow piled high in winter, rendering life difficult as the students headed up the narrow mountain roads—too slim for even the snow plows to squeeze through—to classes, but Kuroh made the 40-minutes-one-way trek every day, happy to do so.

While officially a fifth-year on paper, the entire elementary school only included four students, and so Kuroh received his lectures in a large classroom

with the other three students and only two teachers between the four of them. It was a rather cozy little learning environment.

The other three students aside from Kuroh all had the family name ‘Yamamoto’ and represented the eldest, middle, and youngest sons of a pottery-making family that had moved here from the city. Their names were Seita, Kouta, and Heita, and they were all younger than Kuroh, being fourth, third, and first years, respectively. While their names may have been quite similar, their faces were even more so, and they were a rather famous trio of brothers among the locals. Their faces were charmingly plump, with husky bodies to match, and while none of the three could be described as adept in school, they possessed big-hearted personalities and were fawned upon by everyone around them, truly well-dispositioned children.

They’d been nicknamed the “daifuku trio” and seemed to take to it quite keenly, openly declaring themselves as such to others. The first member of the daifuku trio was Seita, the second Kouta, and the third Heita. Given his greater separation in age from his brothers, Heita had a slighter physique than the older two, but only a year separated Seita and Kouta, and they were almost the same height as well—which led the teachers to often get mixed up and call them by the other’s name.

For Kuroh, though, these were his only three classmates, and the only playmates his age in the area.

On this day, it had unfortunately started to rain in the morning, preventing the children from being able to go outside to play, and so they passed their

afternoon break indoors. The eldest brother Seita, perhaps taking after his potter father, was quite nimble with his fingers and drew rather well, often sketching drafts of manga. Today as well, he could be seen scribbling in the corners of his textbook, rousing the excitement of his younger brothers who waited impatiently to behold the finished product in flip-book form.

“Ah! It’s moving, it’s moving! The old guy’s dancing!!”

“Niichan, that’s amazing!” Kouta and Heita laughed, expressing their joy with excitement, and Heita turned to call out to Kuroh where he sat in a seat near the window quietly scribbling in his school journal. “Hey, Kuro-chan! Come check this out! Niichan’s latest work is really funny—it’s ‘the dancing baldie’!”

Kuroh raised his head, smiling softly. “When I finish writing this.” Whether inside or outside the school walls, Kuroh was viewed as something of an older brother to the trio, and even most adults granted him their trust, occasionally relying upon him to supervise the other three alone. This was something that arose from the intimate bonds forged between everyone living on the bounds of society—after all, most everyone here was familiar with everyone else, and Kuroh was of course on good terms with the daifuku trio’s parents. Kuroh often looked after the daifuku trio not purely out of any sense of duty, but because he enjoyed doting on them.

Listening to the sound of the rain settling like a hazy mist pattering against the window pane, he attempted to restart his diary scribbles, but when Heita let out another gasp of deep admiration, his hand paused once more in its writing.

“You really can do anything, Niichan!”

His words called to mind again the morning's incident.

‘I...’

A vision of his powers misfiring—he'd lost track of how many times he'd repeated the same thing. It was as if he understood on one level but didn't on another.

‘Maybe I'm really just too unskilled...’ He spared a glance over at the daifuku trio. His fingers weren't as nimble as the eldest's, and he wasn't as quick on his feet as the middle child. He'd hoped he still at least surpassed the youngest in all areas, but then just a while ago they'd all realized during music lessons what an amazing singing voice he had.

Scribbling away, he immersed himself in his thoughts. ‘I screw up my cooking, and I still haven't learned to master using my powers as a clansman... At this rate, I'm just going to wind up disappointing Ichigen-sama...’

As he sat there dwelling on dark thoughts, though, a voice called to him from his side. “Yatogami-kun, can I speak with you?”

“Ah—yes? What is it, Kawamura-sensei?” This was Kawamura Mitsue-sensei, one of the two teachers in the whole school. She was a strange sort—only in her mid 20s but having by her own volition moved to this poor village—but was very passionate about education and truly cared for her students. Her face was young enough to pass for a high-school student, and she wore rather dull black-framed glasses and no makeup. Her skin tone was pale and she had rather pleasing features, but it seemed she'd never considered trying to dress up or look

fashionable.

Given that he was speaking with a teacher, Kuroh moved to stand out of politeness, but Akagi-sensei moved to stop him with, “Oh, no no, don’t worry, Yatogami-kun. It’s really nothing important. Ah, well, that is...” She fidgeted a bit as she groped for words. “Are you...quite sure it’s all right for me as well to drop by your home tonight?”

“Tonight?” After thinking for a moment, he recalled, “Oh right! Tonight it’s our turn, huh!” He threw her a toothy smile. “Of course! You’re a citizen of this area, after all!”

Akagi-sensei fell silent, words trapped in her throat, and flushed lightly for some reason. In their village, every Friday evening, the adult all gathered for an “assembly,” which was really little more than a drinking party. The gathering was held at the home of a different prominent villager every week, and everyone brought along food or drink, making merry well into the night—and tonight, it would be held at the home of the village celebrity, Miwa Ichigen. The other day, when Akagi-sensei had dropped by on a home visit, Ichigen had good-naturedly invited her to join them. If you’re free, won’t you join us next time?

“Ah—ha...nngh...” Akagi-sensei’s voice took on a strange tone. “Well, um... what...should I wear, do you think?”

“‘Wear’?” Kuroh cocked his head, trying to recall what sorts of outfits the people attending the gathering usually wore. “Let’s see...I think everyone generally just wears casual clothes?” Truthfully, most showed up in fieldwork

clothes or sweatsuits, and the refreshments included local sake, boiled vegetables, and dried foodstuffs.

“I see. Miwa-san phrased it as ‘a casual gathering of friends’, so it’s not all that formal, huh.” She nodded to herself. “Also, it seems there’s a rule to bring some kind of present as well—but I wonder if handmade sweets would suffice?”

“Ah, yes, I’m sure!” he instantly replied. Within his mind rose up images of manjuu—steamed buns filled with sweet bean paste—and ohagi—rice balls coated with sweet red beans—the sort of treats the older women brought along to these sorts of gatherings. “There are some who attend that don’t drink, so I’m sure they’ll be thrilled to have something sweet to enjoy!”

Akagi-sensei laughed merrily. “I see! Then I suppose I’ll give it my best shot!”

Kuroh returned her smile, as manners dictated, but inside his head, he pondered, ‘Huh...? I wonder if she’s imagining something a bit different from reality...?’ He couldn’t put it properly into words, but...we felt quite sure there was some discrepancy between the “casual gathering of friends” a young woman who’d just transferred here from the city might imagine and the actual “assembly which was really little more than a drinking party” held in their village.

However, before Kuroh could correct this misconception, the chime rang, ending their rest period. Akagi-sensei glanced up at the clock on the wall, adding, “Well then, I’ll be there with bells on this evening! Give my regards to Miwa-san!” She reverted here back to teacher-mode from ‘local young woman’ and smiled at him.

“Yes, ma’am!” he replied brightly.

When Kuroh returned home, Ichigen was already preparing for the evening’s festivities, wearing an apron and hard at work cooking something up in the kitchen. Kuroh offered his aid, but Ichigen refused him with, “Nooo no no, I can’t possibly have you help prepare snacks for a drinking part,” and Kuroh didn’t press the matter any further, able to tell that Ichigen was more than enjoying cooking and prepping.

He gracefully flipped the fry pan while humming a merry tune, and Kuroh grinned at this before departing the kitchen. He’d have to have Ichigen teach him how to prepare snacks like that for dinner parties when he was older. He decided to instead, though, start cleaning up, to ensure that their guests could enjoy themselves in the utmost comfort.

Apparently their home had once belonged to a teacher. He had risen through the ranks to become principal of the school that Kuroh and the other children now attended but had passed away over 10 years ago. He seemed to have been a very pleasant fellow, and even to this day, when the village elders broke into their alcohol, they would fondly recall tales of the man.

He’d also been quite famous as a local historian, submitting essays to a folklore journal. Perhaps because it had been built by such a refined person, their home boasted far more storage areas and cabinets lined with bookshelves than most buildings, lending it a unique charm. Those cabinets were still filled, even now, with stacks of folklore-associated writings and props gathered by the teacher over the years, and rummaging about after dark was more than a little

spooky.

Ichigen, though, was rather fond of all the masks and dolls and folk art, and after discussing the matter with the teacher's surviving family, he'd apparently been allowed to keep the artifacts where they were.

After sweeping the genkan area, he changed the toilet seat cover and mat before giving the parlor tatami a vigorous beating. As he wandered down the hall on the second floor, bucket in hand, though, he paused for a moment in consideration before peeking into the room at the far end, deciding he'd air it out. He could smell a faint perfume.

Quite some time had passed now since the man who'd been Kuroh's elder apprentice had left their home, but the room was just as he'd left it. Ichigen had smiled, suggesting, "I don't expect he'll be back—but just in case, let's leave it be." To Kuroh, those words had been incomprehensible, though. When the man had left their home, it had been in a manner akin to a farewell.

Kuroh could still remember clearly—the way the man turned his sword on Ichigen with honest murderous intent, and how Kuroh had leapt between Ichigen and the man, despite knowing he had no hope of triumph but still desperate to protect Ichigen. And how Ichigen had calmly placed a hand on him, smiling, "It's all right, Kuro."

Neither before that moment nor since had Kuroh ever seen Ichigen shed blood from his brow, nor seen him slice his blade with a scream—which spoke volumes about the skill of his opponent: enough to make the master of the Miwa Meijin School go all out in battle. While Ichigen had ultimately triumphed,

Kuroh admittedly hadn't been able to tell the actual difference in strength between the pair, so advanced a level had they battled on.

But the man accepted his defeat easily, grinning with a response of, "Thanks for taking care of me all this time," before taking his leave. He'd lived here with Ichigen since long before Kuroh had arrived...yet he left with no obvious regrets.

Ichigen had only replied with, "Sure, take care," sending him off with a smile. To this day, Kuroh still struggled to understand this. He couldn't imagine there had been any significant amount of discord between the pair, and it was a mystery as to why he'd, out of the blue, launched into battle.

But...

The man had indeed come at Ichigen with clear intent to kill that time. That was the one thing Kuroh was certain of.

"He sure was strange..." Kuroh muttered to himself, sweeping his gaze around the room. A chest of drawers was backed up against the eastern wall, with a bed along the western, but perhaps the most curious feature of the room was the tall mirror and makeup station against the southern wall, with lotions and perfumes, creams and insulation packs lined up. The man had often been found seated at the desk for hours on end, never tiring of his skin care regimen. "...Yeah, definitely weird," he recalled with renewed certainty.

Kuroh had always had mixed feelings about the man; the fact that he'd tried to harm Ichigen, for whom Kuroh held no small amount of affection, was more

than enough to rouse animosity, but Ichigen himself didn't seem bothered in the least, and more to the point—the man had been not merely a senior apprentice, but Kuroh's sempai as a clansman to the Seventh King. It seemed that he'd been taught all about the world of Kings which Kuroh knew nothing of, enjoying a different sort of trust by Ichigen from that which Kuroh received.

Looking back, the man was hardly ever home, and on the days that he did make it back, he'd trade tales of his travels over drinks with Ichigen. At times, his journeys were undertaken as ordered by Ichigen, but other times he would just travel about of his own free will. He'd been a free-spirited, broad-minded, but rather elusive sort of fellow. Kuroh hadn't hated him in the least.

He'd certainly had times where he wasn't entirely sure how to approach the man, but he'd honestly believed him not to be an evil person and respected his skill with the sword and the discretion he occasionally displayed.

And it was precisely because this was the sort of man he was...that Kuroh found himself unable to accept the way he'd run off like that, as if betraying Ichigen. Just before he left, the last thing he'd said to Kuroh had been, "Hope we meet again someday, Kuroh-chan." Then, with a fleeting smile, he'd disappeared.

Kuroh pondered—if he ever was to see that man again...how would he approach him?

With respect as a sempai of the same school?

Or...

On the field of battle, as an enemy?

The ‘gathering’ started casually around about sunset. Despite the fact that no precise time had been set for the start, guests began arriving in small groups, and in no time at all, one was met with the sight of sake glasses being passed around, a serene, truly “country” setting indeed.

There was also the custom of hanging paper lanterns bearing the family crest of the household hosting the gathering. In this way, even without sending out formal invitations, passersby in the village could drop by at their leisure. They would light the lamps as the festivities started and douse them when all was over, and it was Kuroh’s duty this time to light the lanterns of the Miwa household. While Ichigen had assured him there really was nothing in particular he needed to do, Kuroh intended to aid in any way he could until his curfew.

But despite his willing spirit, his flesh was still that of a child, and he did his best to stay away from where the adults were enjoying themselves with their alcohol, instead limiting himself to delivering food and drinks. He’d studied how to serve warm sake at many a gathering such as this and could be seen wandering about refilling glasses from a large kettle of hot sake throughout the evening.

Around 8, he headed into the parlor carrying a tray with several decanters, finding the party in full swing. Removing the room divider, he connected the living room Ichigen and Kuroh typically used to the guest room which was only used at times such as this, creating a space of some 40 mats in size with two long rows of tables along the sides where a good 50 or so guests crowded in.

Kuroh began to clear away the empty glasses and cutlery when some neighbors he recognized complimented him with, “You’re such a good boy, Kuroh,” and, “Such a fine, hard-working young man!” He flushed, self-conscious, and returned his appreciation for the words. Casting a glance at the center of the gathering, he could see Ichigen surrounded by a large group of people, calmly carrying on a conversation. Everyone seemed to love speaking with him—young or old, man or woman, and at assemblies such as this, Ichigen was rarely seen without someone hanging about near him.

Kuroh felt his heart swell with pride at the site, thrilled that this person he admired so much was clearly loved by others as well. In some ways, rather than filling him with affection, it instead left him feeling satisfied, body and soul.

Truly, Ichigen’s popularity in this village was an amazing thing indeed. Men in the prime of their life would come to him for advice on taxes and inheritance, while young men would consult him on matters of love. He’d listen over a cup of tea to old women complain about not being able to get on with their daughters-in-law, and even the mayor would consult him on internal management matters for the village.

His open and honest personality, sharing his profound knowledge gained after extensive experience with all who sought it, without discrimination, had made Ichigen into the most important person in this village. If ever anyone was feeling troubled, it became common habit among the villagers to say, “I’m going to speak with Miwa-san for a bit,” with many calling him, “Miwa-sensei.”

At present, the crowd around Ichigen was listening to him relate tales of his

travels through Central and South America, stories that Kuroh had heard many times before. This time, he was relating the comedic tale of how he'd been captured by robbers wielding guns and wound up becoming friends with them in the end. As expected, the crowd erupted into laughter at the punchline, and Kuroh—standing a bit off to the side and eavesdropping on the conversation, couldn't help the snickered smile that rose to his lips unthinkingly.

Ichigen could easily tell jokes and funny stories while keeping a serious face, but even he broke out into a wry grin, adding for good measure, “And since then, I’ve never been able to stomach tacos again!” and this sent the others into fits of laughter once more. While most would’ve wrapped things up there, though, Ichigen continued with a grand smile, “I wonder if you // have danced the ‘Brazilia’? // Or else the Samba?” He repeated the phrase again, nodded to himself.

The onlookers froze, with some offering, “Oh...oh...” or, “Ah, yes...I see...” vague responses with confused expressions on their faces—reactions which clearly indicated the collective sense of, “We don’t know what the heck you’re talking about, but we like you so we’re not going to say anything.” But Ichigen seemed to be enjoying himself quite a bit, and when he flicked his gaze over to Kuroh, the boy kept his features schooled and serious while offering the tiniest mimed gesture of applause, which lit Ichigen’s features with a thrilled but bashful smile as he scratched the back of his head.

“.....”

“.....”

Here, now, the crowd around him let themselves be dragged along by his good mood into chuckles, but neither master nor disciple understood...that the people of the village simply looked the other way in moments like this with reference to Miwa Ichigen: “He’s really an amazing person and aside from that, there’s not a thing wrong with him, but sometimes, out of the blue, he’ll just say the strangest things!”

As one old woman earnestly lamented, “If it weren’t for that, he’d have his pick of wives I’m sure.” Others contended that, “Perhaps it’s something to do with his ancestors? Maybe he should go to one of the mountain women and have himself exorcised,” while still others maintained the opposite: “No, it’s nothing to do with his ancestors; that’s clearly the work of a kitsune!” All were convinced, though, that he’d somehow been possessed.

In contrast, those who stood up in support of him offered, “But even if you grant him that one shortcoming, that just puts him on the same level as the rest of us. He’s really a smart man.” He’d simply been performing “Miwa Ichigen Story and Song”, and the mayor fell clearly in this camp, offering with an uncomfortable smile when pressed for comment, “I’m afraid your depth is a bit much for me to comprehend, Miwa-sensei,” keeping his words as inoffensive as possible.

The villagers had, for the most part, accepted this as, “Miwa Disease,” passing it off as a side-effect of his work as a poet, or perhaps some avant-garde joke. Naturally, neither Ichigen nor Kuroh saw it as such; Kuroh felt himself brought near to tears every time he heard Ichigen recite his poetry, so moved was he by

the words—which prompted those around him to worry for his future.

Ichigen would so effortlessly—and carelessly—deliver these “precious words,” though, that Kuroh put serious thought into making it his duty to somehow record and collect them. For the time being, though, he slipped away from the party, putting together a plan to somehow get his hands on a recording device.

When Kuroh returned to the kitchen, all he found were three housewives—volunteers who helped the host out by preparing snacks to go with the drinks and setting the table. There was no shift list per se, and typically the job went to whichever of the ladies of the village happened to be free that evening. Without their hard work, they could hardly have anything fit to call a “party”.

Seemingly free for the moment, all three were sitting in chairs and shooting the breeze, and when they caught sight of Kuroh, one offered, “Good work tonight, Kuroh-chan,” while another thanked him with, “You should be off to bed soon.”

Kuroh returned with a smile, “Yes, thank you very much. I’ll be off as soon as I’ve finished these dishes.” From the adults’ point of view, Kuroh was almost too good a boy to be true; while Ichigen certainly enjoyed a great deal of affection, Kuroh was equally cherished by the other villagers. One of the women spoke up, “That reminds me, Kuroh-chan—this may seem a bit strange to ask, but...has Miwa-sensei never married?”

Kuroh rolled his sleeves up and face the sink, looking a bit dubious. “Eh? Ah, no, I don’t believe I’ve heard as such?”

“I see.”

“Hmm...” The women looked at each other a bit ambiguously, and another spoke up, “And...he’s not seeing anyone, right?”

“.....” Kuroh paused for a moment in thought before responding without much conviction, “I...don’t think so?” If he had been, Kuroh was certain he’d know. After all, he spent most every hour of the day with Ichigen.

But the women immediately broke into excited conversation at this. “Then—Akagi-sensei might still have a chance!”

“Mmm, but Miwa-sensei is awfully oblivious...”

Kuroh couldn’t quite grasp their discussion; ‘Why did Akagi-sensei’s name come up all of a sudden?’ Ah right, Akagi-sensei had been in the parlor earlier, her hair arranged nicely (a rare sight indeed) with a proper nice outfit on—but she’d had the bad luck to be cornered by the most long-winded old man in the village, Tanaka, and had been forced to listen to him relate the tale of the special mission he’d been entrusted with back during the war.

“And back then, I was under orders from the lieutenant, and we boarded this submarine bound for a port in Germany, where we were supposed to bring back something that’d change the fate of the country, and...” She’d had to listen to him babble on like that for some two or three hours and had looked a bit worn out.

“And she even went and made such lovely cream puffs—but apparently that old fart Tanaka gobbled them all up!”

“So then—the person she really wanted to try them didn’t get to, huh... The poor thing.”

The women sighed as a group, and Kuroh grew curious. “...Who did she want to try them, then?”

At this, the woman—all different ages—turned at once to stare at him, announcing all at once, “Oh, Kuroh-chan...” and “You mustn’t grow into a fuddy-duddy, okay? Make sure you become a proper man who can understand a woman’s feelings!” and “Or else you’ll wind up like Miwa-sensei and miss your chance to get hitched!”

Kuroh could only release a soft, “Uh...” in response.

The women, eyes glittering, then added with wry smiles, “Though perhaps it’s a bit too soon to be discussing such things with Kuroh-chan.” And that seemed to be the end of that.

As the hands on the clock just passed 9, Kuroh headed up to his room on the second floor. The gathering was still going on in the parlor, but given that Kuroh was only in elementary school, it was likely time he went to bed. Having already taken his bath and brushed his teeth, he had but to change into his pajamas and climb into bed—but seeing as he wasn’t all that tired just yet, he lay down and gazed out his window at the nighttime scenery.

Light spilling outside from the party room was staining the garden orange, and the moon shone brightly across the sky.

‘I really...want to hurry up and learn to use my powers as a Clansman. And

for that...' He shifted his glance to the area around the pond, gaze falling on the cat from this morning scratching its chin. Perhaps feeling him watching it, it raised its head and opened its mouth to meow—but the sound echoing from the party downstairs kept it from reaching his ears.

The cat turned away here and darted away to the other side of the fence—and Kuroh narrowed his eyes, an idea starting to form in his mind. "...All right." He nodded to himself, satisfied. "I'll start training even harder starting tomorrow. This is the only way for now."

He then lay down and curled up under his futon, his long day at last coming to an end.

Starting the next morning, Kuroh poured himself even more furiously into his training. While this naturally included his studies and sword mastery, he also attempted a number of tacks in an effort to develop his Clansman abilities.

And he decided that the best way to accomplish this...was to thoroughly observe Miwa Ichigen. He rationalized this as, 'It's simply that I don't completely understand Ichigen-sama yet. This is surely why I cannot yet wield the power of the Seventh King, the Colorless King.'

Truthfully, though, he hadn't yet been taught the details of what exactly a Clansman was. He hadn't even learned the terms "King" and the "Clansmen" who share their power from Ichigen himself—picking them up indirectly from the man who'd once shared their home with Kuroh and Ichigen. As such, Kuroh had little choice but to try and figure out the details himself.

The Clansmen received part of Ichigen's power, necessitating as much synchronization as possible with Ichigen's consciousness. Kuroh therefore came to the rather overly simplistic conclusion after the evening of the 'gathering' that the best way to accomplish this was to imitate Ichigen's movement and behavior.

Kuroh was the sort that, once he got an idea in his head, he would carry it out with brutal focus. During meals, he would lift and lower his chopsticks with the same timing and rhythm as Ichigen, moving his feet forward in tempo with Ichigen's own pace, and when Ichigen settled in to read a book, Kuroh endeavored to take up his reading as well. He would recreate his chuckles, and the way he cocked his head, and through it all...actually found himself enjoying the exercise a bit.

At one point, he'd even tried wearing the same clothes as Ichigen as well, but this turned out to be rather too awe-inspiring to carry out, and so he settled for simply imitating Ichigen's style as much as possible. And then there were his attempts to occasionally go about muttering haiku, as was Ichigen's penchant:

“The rainy season...generates so much anguish...over the laundry”

and

“Behold here these snails...lumbering about, dazed...through the misty rains”

but none of his poems seemed to have quite the same flair. Ichigen truly must have been a genius, Kuroh recognized anew.

Though of course, there was no way Ichigen wouldn't, along the way, notice Kuroh doing all of this, and one day he questioned curiously, “Hey, Kuro... Is there some reason you've been acting like my mirror lately?”

Kuroh candidly explained his efforts, how he was training himself as a Clansman by imitating Ichigen.

“Hmm...” Ichigen crossed his arms over his chest, expression wavering between admiration and bemusement, and Kuroh grew a bit worried.

“Does that...mean this won't work, then...?” If Ichigen himself put down his methods as useless, there was no point in attempting things further.

But Ichigen replied only with, “...I'm sorry,” a soft apology. “It's just, even I myself don't know if that will help or not.”

Kuroh blinked in surprise. He would never had thought that the King himself wouldn't be able to advise him on this matter.

Ichigen continued slowly, “You see, it's kind of like...trying to explain how to perceive the world we live in. We could be looking at the same color red, but our respective ways of grasping that shade may in fact differ. If I tell you, ‘Use red,’ the red you see for yourself and that I see might not be the same. So I'm

afraid I can't tell you if that's a worthwhile effort or not. Clothing sizes and taste in foods differ from person to person, after all."

"I see..." Kuroh murmured to himself after falling silent for a moment. 'I feel like I both do and don't quite understand...' He continued, questioning, "Then, how do you utilize your powers as a King, Ichigen-sama?"

To this, Ichigen replied, "Hmm...I suppose it's something like...capturing the stars as they fall from the sky..."

"....." Kuroh was at a loss for words to respond.

"I believe another King once described it as 'releasing the raging inferno that bellows up from within in tiny amounts'."

"An...inferno?"

"Indeed; like, WHOOM!" This only seemed to confuse Kuroh further, though, and Ichigen continued with a gentle smile, "Kuro—this is, at its core, simply a matter of what you want to do. The same power that I'm able to wield already sleeps within you."

Kuroh recalled being reminded of this before—"The contract between us has already been made; you have but to bring out that power on your own."

"Your true essence—how you will face this world, how you'll confront it. Perhaps that's...the key to everything?"

Kuroh hung his head at this. He still didn't quite understand his true nature himself. Ichigen, as if clearly grasping the sensitive nature of Kuroh's heart, though, placed both hands on Kuroh's small shoulders. "But it's probably best

to just try with matters you aren't sure are appropriate or not, at least until you can figure it out for yourself." He finished with a grin. "That settles it then—you're to keep tabs on me 24-7 and do exactly as I do for now, Kuroh!" Gestures like this spoke volumes of how broad-minded Ichigen was.

"Eh? Y—you mean it?"

"Indeed. You're only in elementary school, after all; I sometimes find myself forgetting that fact. It would actually be more worrisome if you did understand yourself perfectly at your age." He cocked his head to the side. "I'd hazard that you're likely the youngest Clansman in any of the Clans right now."

"I—I am?" Ichigen very rarely spoke of anything regarding the Kings with Kuroh.

"Yup." He grinned. "So have a bit more confidence in yourself, Kuroh."

Kuroh straightened his back, cheeks flushed. "Yes, Ichigen-sama!"

His true nature... He'd always thought "revering Ichigen-sama" would be enough, and they passed the time after that merrily constructing haiku together.

On receiving official permission from Ichigen, Kuroh dove even more zealously into his attempts at imitation. However, while Ichigen had granted that, "It is true that copying your teacher is a rather common method of study in the field of martial arts, and you seem rather suited to it as well," the actual results were...not quite so favorable. Try as he might, Kuroh simply could not manage to use his special powers, and he found himself deep in thought on such matters even at school.

“...What’s wrong, Kuro-chan?” the youngest of the daifuku trio, Heita, asked.

“Oh...it’s nothing, really. Sorry.” Kuroh forced a smile. He was using their break period to check over Heita’s work and had just drifted off. Heita’s two elder brothers, Seita and Kouta, were perched over a hand-crafted shougi board, moving their pawns about as they played. Kuroh smiled, “Now—you take one from the tens’ place here, and then in the ones’ place...” He was teaching Heita subtraction, and the boy nodded along, eyes glittering.

“Amazing! I totally get it now, Kuro-chan!” Kuroh nodded, pleased, and Heita continued a bit cockily, “Way different from my brothers!”

“Well excuse us!”

“Not like we’ve got any hope of ever being as smart as Kuro-chan, after all!” Kuroh cocked his head, refuting the protest, and the daifuku trio laughed wryly. “What’re you even saying? You’re the smartest—well, there’s only the four of us in the whole school, but you’re still definitely the smartest one here!”

“We all think you’re amazing!” both the elder brothers continued.

“...I see...” He’d never really thought about it himself, but it seemed the daifuku trio really did feel that way. “...Thank you.”

“Hey hey, Kuro-chan! How’d you get so smart?” Heita asked.

Kuroh tilted his head in thought before responding, “Hm...perhaps because I occasionally have Ichigen-sama look over my work?” His expression brightened here, “Hey! Why don’t you three come over and have Ichigen-sama teach you a bit some free weekend??” Oh that was a fine idea—! But—at this suggestion, the

trio's expressions grew a bit vague as they glanced at one another. "...What's wrong?" Kuroh asked hesitantly.

"Oh, no, just..."

"We'll...pass."

"Right?"

Kuroh's expression shifted to one of irritation, which the eldest, Seita, picked up on immediately, waving his hands in protest, "No no, don't get us wrong. It's not like we have a problem with Miwa-sensei! We all love him, see?"

"Then—why?"

"Well, it's just..." Seita spoke up for the group, explaining, "You...do know that Miwa-sensei is...really really bad at teaching others, right?"

Kuroh's eyes widened. "Huh?"

"Mmm, well it's like..." Kouta stepped in to offer support. "It's like he's too smart. He can do anything, so maybe he can't really explain things easily to those of us who can't do them? My dad said that geniuses are really bad at teaching others. There's famous baseball players like that too; when they're teaching someone else how to bat, they'll be all, 'Just do your wrist like this here, and then WHACK the ball,' and no one else around them has any clue what they're talking about."

"That's not—"

"—true," Kuroh had been about to protest, but his words stalled in his throat.

“I suppose it’s something like...capturing the stars as they fall from the sky...”

That was how Ichigen had related the sensation he experienced when using his powers. ‘Well, perhaps...just a very very little...Ichigen-sama’s figures of speech may be a bit difficult for commoners to grasp...’

“But—” he rushed to angrily defend Ichigen, “—that’s simply because he’s been entrusted with great power—”

The elder two of the daifuku trio tried to calm him, “Oh no no no—we totally get that!”

“That’s what we’re saying! Miwa-sensei’s a genius!”

“Plus,” Seita added with a smile, “You’re not too different from him yourself.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Kouta responded with a chuckle, “Just—you’re pretty systematically a genius as well. At least with a sword.”

Kuroh froze. “...Surely you must be joking,” he hazarded, lacking in confidence. Kuroh—a genius? Impossible—or so he thought. His skills with the sword had been developed after extensive, exhaustive training. It was only through hard work that he’d ultimately been able to overcome his innate inability to grasp concepts and awkwardness. He had no talents whatsoever—there was no way he was any ‘genius’.

Seita released a soft sigh. “I get it... You just can’t understand it yourself. You remember that one time when we all went to watch you practice with your sword?”

Kuroh nodded. “Yes—I do recall.”

“Back then, Miwa-sensei really flung you around, remember? We couldn’t tell what he was doing at all—it was some weird move.”

“It’s like—he jumped right over you, and then tossed you aside.”

“Ah,” Kuroh recalled now. “You mean the kasumisansou.”

“Well, whatever it’s called—you learned how to do that move from Miwa-sensei, right?”

“I did,” Kuroh affirmed, and Kouta suppressed a chuckle.

“That was the moment when we all realized deep inside that you and Miwa-sensei were on a whole different level from us.”

Kuroh cocked his head, genuinely confused. “Huh? How so? I don’t get it...”

Seita responded, “Well just—that’s what we mean when we say you’re a genius. Your conversation back then was just amazing!”

“What are you talking about? Explain yourselves properly!”

“No, see—when you asked him how he did that move, Miwa-sensei had this completely straight face and said, ‘Hmm, yes... Well first you jump straight up over your opponent about two meters, then twist your body about in mid-air,’ remember?”

“Yes...”

Kuroh’s expression was growing more and more timid here, and Kouta and Seita piped up together, “Normal humans can’t just jump two whole meters

straight up into the air!”

Shocked, Kuroh responded, “...They can’t?”

“THEY CAN’T.”

“Definitely impossible.”

“Yup, impossible,” Heita added with a smile.

“.....” Kuroh fell silent here, and Seita continued.

“And so—this is where it really starts to get weird: Kuro-chan, you listened to him so seriously, and then just said, ‘I understand’ and started practicing it—and then maybe an hour or later, you were jumping up something like a whole meter into the air! And you still looked disappointed! Going on about, ‘Only halfway there...’”

“Oh...yeah...”

“Normal elementary school students can’t even jump one meter!” Now all three of the daifuku trio joined in here, and Kuroh cradled his head in his hands.

“I was...absolutely certain that any adult could easily leap two meters though...”

Seita and Kouta exchanged glances. “...Just as we thought.”

“You seem really capable and put-together, Kuro-chan, but you’re definitely ‘off’ in a lot of ways.”

“Yeah...” Catching Kuroh deep in thought, Seita added, “And like I mentioned before, the reason we all thought you were amazing...was because of how you

were able to keep up with his explanation. Most normal people couldn't possibly understand what he was saying! No one understands what that guy says!"

"So it must be because you're a genius to, in a way. Seriously."

"....." Kuroh sank deeper into thought. Perhaps these three...had just given him an important clue.

'I...didn't even understand it myself?' Setting aside whether or not he was a genius for now—the point was that there seemed to be some definite difference between the Yatogami Kuroh he perceived himself to be and that seen by others around him. 'Maybe that's the key... Maybe that's where my true nature lies.' He schooled his features. "Thank you. Your words have helped me understand a lot of things."

Seita and Kouta glanced at one another. "Huh? W—we have?"

"I really don't think we said anything really important..."

The two scratched their heads, a bit bashful, and the youngest, Heita, piped up, "It's fine, Kuro-chan! We're all friends here, right?" He reached out and took Kuroh's hand in his own with a smile.

Kuroh returned, "Thank you," gripping his hand back with a smile of his own and feeling like he was on the verge of a breakthrough.

After school, the brothers invited Kuroh along with them to fish down by the river, but Kuroh declined, heading back home. He warned them sternly to be careful before returning home—only to find Ichigen gone, with a letter left for

him on the little table in the living room.

I'll be gone for about two days. Sorry—but please take care of your own meals for the time being. I'm sure I don't need to remind you at your age, but take care around the flame should you use the stove.

Ichigen had occasionally disappeared without notice like this in the past. Most times he never explained his reasoning, leaving Kuroh to assume he was off on some King-related business. He never delved too deeply as to why, but it always left Kuroh wishing he could grow up faster, in order to more quickly be of aid to Ichigen on these errands.

“I see...” He was a bit disappointed. He'd felt that he could phrase his questions with more finesse now, given the daifuku trio's help. He'd been assured he was the one best equipped to keeping up with the genius Miwa Ichigen—and those words instilled within him great confidence. “Guess I didn't need to hurry home after all...”

He was entertaining the thought of heading out to join the brothers in their fishing excursion, a childlike dilemma indeed, when he heard a voice from the garden, “Kuroh-chan, are you in there?”

He quickly stood and hurried over to the glass door, yanking it open just in time to find a gentle-faced old woman entering via the kitchen door. “Ah, Watanabe-san. Please come inside.” He ducked a nod; this was their next-door neighbor. She'd lost her husband two years before and was now spending restful days with her second son and his wife. She was a very wise and kind woman, and from the moment Kuroh had been taken in by Ichigen, she'd taken

a shine to him, helping to care for him. “One man alone can’t possibly be expected to care properly for a child, right? Plus with all my grandchildren living on their own now, I’m actually enjoying looking after Kuroh-chan.” She would often make treats for Kuroh and even knit him a muffler. To Kuroh, she was a peerless savior.

Given Kuroh’s personality, he often struck a tone of overly exaggerated politeness with his elders, deeming them more than worthy of respect, and here as well he spoke reverently to the old woman, like some character from a period play, “My deepest apologies for your traveling so far to our humble abode, but Miwa is unavailable at the moment, I’m afraid.”

“Oh yes, I know. He left word with me when he left, asking me to look in on you. So—I’ve brought some dinner—would you like some?”

“Oh my! I didn’t realize!” He flashed a toothy grin at her. “Thank you ever so much, Watanabe-san! I’m ever in your debt.” Such phrasing and vocabulary were rather unexpected from the mouth of an elementary school student.

“You’re always such a proper young man, Kuroh-chan.” Her words held just the tiniest hint of teasing, but it flew over Kuroh’s head, and he merely blushed at the compliment—perhaps the last remaining evidence of his being still a child.

He took the plastic-wrapped contained from the old woman and let out a shout of delight. “Ah!! You made an dashimaki omelet!” His voice was filled with untainted elation. “Thank you so much! I love your omelets, Watanabe-san!”

“Do you, now?” Her eyes crinkled with a smile. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“Yes, ma’am! It has a very strong flavor—but at the same time, it’s very refreshing and simple! I hope that I can make dashimaki omelets like yours some day!”

Watanabe-san stood in thought for a moment. “Kuroh-chan...”

“Yes?”

“Would you like me to teach you how to make that omelet?”

Kuroh froze at the offer, managing to get out after a moment, “Eh?”

“What’s wrong?” she asked, puzzled.

“Oh, yes, just...” He wrestled with himself for a moment. “...I’m sorry,” he apologized, ducking his head in honest penitence. “I’m honored, truly, but... It’s just, you see...”

Watanabe-san cut him off with some perplexity. “No no, I’m not trying to force you or anything, but...why not?”

“Ah—yes, ma’am, see...” he scrambled to explain himself. He would hate to be thought some crude barbarian turning down her kind offer for no reason whatsoever. “Well, I’m learning a lot of things from Ichigen-sama right now, you know?”

“Indeed you are,” she grinned. “Working hard every day.”

Kuroh flushed. “Thank you very much. But—I’m exceedingly uncoordinated, and just...I have to take things very slowly, and I think...that it’s best I not try and learn too many things from different people.”

Watanabe-san cocked her head to the side slowly. "...And why is that?"

"Well—if I did, I feel that my efforts would thereby become half-hearted and incomplete. So—I think I ought to learn from Ichigen-sama first—be it cooking or anything else—and then after mastering the activity under his tutelage, move on to receiving lessons from others."

The woman's eyes widened just a bit, and she responded in wonderment, "... You really are a serious young man, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry..."

"Not at all. There's no need to fret over it. I understand your way of thinking quite well." She then added with a chuckle, "But goodness, the master and his pupil certainly are of different stock. Miwa-san gladly took me up on my offer for lessons without protest."

"....." Kuroh allowed himself a moment to think, then questioned, "You mean...lessons on how to make adashimaki omelet...?"

"Oh no," she responded easily, "I mean cooking lessons in general."

"Eh?" Kuroh stiffened. "General cooking lessons?"

The woman seemed surprised at his own shock. "Oh? He never told you? Miwa-san couldn't do anything when he moved here! But there was little he could do to help that on his own—so I taught him all sorts of things."

"!!" While a bit of an overstatement, this was something akin to the sky falling down upon Kuroh's head. 'Ichigen-sama? That genius...only just became as capable as he is now fairly recently?'

“Though of course, being who he is, it didn’t take him long to surpass me.” Her eyes crinkled in nostalgic mirth. “But in the beginning, he’d try drowning the vegetables in oil trying to make stir fry, or toss out the dashi broth thinking it was part of the burnable garbage—you wouldn’t believe how many times I had to get on to him.”

Kuroh released a moan, “That’s just...!” but after giving it a bit of thought, he concluded that perhaps it really wasn’t so strange. After all, Ichigen had originally been heir to a fencing dojo and an accomplished businessman. He could very easily have simply had no time to learn culinary arts in the first half of his life. ‘But to think that he only learned upon arriving here...’

He always seemed to enjoy cooking so much—and yet only a few years prior he hadn’t even been able to properly sauté vegetables...

So...there were things that Ichigen couldn’t do, huh... It was a strange sensation—something of a shock, but at the same time, a revelation that filled him with some fresh passion. “I see... So Ichigen-sama learned his skills from someone else...”

The old woman laughed wryly. “Naturally Miwa-san wasn’t born the way you see him now, you know. He was a bouncing little baby when he came from his mother’s womb, and he was just as much a child as you are at one point as well.”

“Be that as it may...”

“And he received all his knowledge at the hand of teachers and grew up under

the censure and praise of adults around him. It's only natural, right?"

'So he's just like me...' Kuroh reflected silently.

"Plus—I'm sure he's mentioned to you that he learned his skills with the sword from his grandfather. Am I wrong?"

"...No, you're not." He nodded his head deeply. He'd known that much at least for a long time. And yet...he'd never really considered it all that thoroughly.

Watanabe-san's gaze softened. "Kuroh-chan—that's how people become bonded to one another. Miwa-san's grandfather taught him swordsmanship, and now, he's teaching you."

"....."

"And so now—it's not merely Miwa-san who lives within you, but the thoughts and feelings of his grandfather as well have now reached you through the natural flow of things."

"...Within me?"

"Exactly. So—even if you choose to be instructed in cooking by Miwa-san alone, my lessons through him will automatically reach you as well." She then added a bit teasingly, "Which would, I suppose, make you my student as well."

"I...see..." He took a deep breath. "I'd be your..."

"And just so you know—that would make me very happy. I'll pass on some day, but through my culinary skills, I'll still be connected to a youngster like

you. And then, perhaps some day you'll pass your skills on to someone even younger—be it lessons or swordsmanship, whatever you choose. This way of linking the thoughts and feelings of each generation to the next, on and on, in a never-ending relay..." She paused, slowly adding, "...Perhaps this is what we mean by the word 'bond'."

"....." Kuroh's eyes shone, and he lifted his head, opening his mouth to speak, "Watanabe-san, I—"

"Is Miwa-sensei in?" Kuroh's expression changed as a man dashed into the garden—it was the son that Watanabe-san lived with.

"What's the matter? Miwa-san's out right now." Her brows furrowed in irritation at his frantic state, but the man didn't seem to notice his mother's reaction.

"Craaaap, at a time like this? Oh geez, this is bad..."

He covered his face, head tilted up to the sky, and his mother rounded on him, thoroughly put out by now, "Just what is going on here?"

At this, the man cast Kuroh a worried glance before quickly relating the state of affairs: "It's the daifuku—I mean, the Yamamoto family's youngest. He's disappeared!"

Kuroh's and Watanabe's faces both went pale.

As Seita and Kouta related it, while the trio had been out fishing, a pure white deer had appeared before them, and they'd given chase without thought. While they'd grown quite accustomed to life in the village, nothing could take away the

fact that they'd originally grown up in a big city, and so given the rarity of the creature they'd just spotted, they ignored warnings not to go into the mountains alone and headed in that direction.

Both Seita and Kouta were well aware that they were breaking rules that had been drilled into their heads by their elders, though, and after losing sight of the deer, they retreated to their original position. Distance-wise, they likely hadn't traveled more than 100 meters past the treeline. But upon returning back to the beach—it was there that they realized the youngest, Heita, had somehow disappeared.

Hearing the tale related after-the-fact, Kuroh's stomach clenched in pain. The two brothers losing sight of their younger brother...must have felt no small amount of fear. They'd apparently wrestled with their options her—go back into the mountains immediately and try to find Heita, or run for help?

Their ultimate decision was one which, from an objective perspective, they ought to have been applauded for making—as despite knowing full well they would be punished for what they'd done, they made a break for the nearest house they could find. It was an action taken upon thorough consideration in order to avoid either of the remaining brothers being stranded as well—and it proved an apt decision, as in no time at all, news of what had happened had made its way throughout the village.

By the time Kuroh reached the boys' home, Seita and Kouta were clinging to their mother, bawling. She clutched them close while their father, stern-faced, delivered instructions on the search-and-rescue effort to the young men of the

village who'd gathered.

The sun was already setting.

Armed with flashlights and pine torches, they elected the member most familiar with the mountains as the leader and set off in groups of four. All groups were distributed GPS transceivers and instructed to remain in contact at all times, with the Yamamoto home designated home base.

Some of the groups used tracking dogs in their efforts, and the groups were distributed haphazardly around the mountain. From time to time, one could catch the sound of someone calling Heita's name in a loud voice.

The women took to wandering about the village, just in case Heita happened to return. Given his age, there was always the chance he was simply hiding somewhere nearby. Akagi-sensei as well could be spotted walking to and fro, searching for her student with worry etched on her features. Still others were preparing warm meals for the men wandering the mountains in the dark, and others tried to comfort the boys' mother.

Watanabe-san reassured her, "He'll be just fine. Children tend to just pop right up for you to find! Things like this happen every few years—but winter's past, so I'm sure he'll be all right."

By this point...Kuroh had already made his choice: he would set off to save Heita on his own.

He was a child, getting ready to head into the dangerous mountains all alone, well after the sun had set—an action that would, under any other circumstances,

be absolutely unforgivable. However, Kuroh...had a strange conviction reassuring him. He knew...that he would be able to save Heita.

‘If I go, then I’m sure...’

If any other other members of the search teams found out about this—he knew he’d be in for a good scolding, and he was well aware of the risk he was undertaking. This was why he consulted his internal moral code. ‘What would Ichigen-sama do...?’

If Miwa Ichigen were here, there’d be no need for Kuroh to leave at all. He likely would’ve found himself waiting patiently at home with the other children.

But right now, his revered master was nowhere to be seen.

‘Then...’ He set off for the mountains. ‘I’m going. I have to. I’ll save Heita!’

Heita, who’d reached out and grasped his hand tightly with, “Kuroh-chan!”

Heita, who looked up to Kuroh from the bottom of his heart.

Heita, who was adored by all the villagers.

He’d assured Kuroh that they were friends.

‘Then...’

The Miwa Ichigen inside his mind offered a wry smile and nodded—Get going, then, Kuro.

This was not wrong—it was dangerous, to be sure, but not wrong. Heita was in trouble—right now, and a pressing sense of foreboding settled over Kuroh, frightening him to the core.

‘Hurry! Hurry! HURRY!’

Yatogami Kuroh was like unto a lone wolf, streaking out into the night. Relying on what little moonlight there was, he darted through the trees, leaping over boulders as he raced up the slope.

‘Just hang in there, Heita!’

Much later, Kuroh found himself wondering just why he’d been in such a panic, and on what grounds he’d founded his convictions as to what he needed to do—and it was there that Ichigen explained, “In all likelihood, your powers had started to awaken within you, enabling you to, for a time, utilize my own powers—that of foresight.”

In other words, Kuroh had—in that moment—been one with his King.

He kicked at the root of a tree and raced across the mountain ridge—until he at long last caught a faint voice. He snapped to attention, yelling out, “Heita! Are you there?!”

After a moment, a voice came back, steeped in worry, “Ku—Kuro-chan?”

He darted forward in a flash and slid down onto his stomach at the edge of a cliff, peering over the ledge—and grew faint as he laid eyes on a very rough, worn-out Heita clinging desperately to the slender branch of a tree growing out of the cliffside halfway down. The plant itself looked rather weak—far too weak to support even Heita’s light weight, and while admittedly slowly, it was clear that the roots were starting to give way, soil scattering about to fall away at the base.

“Ku–Kuro-chan!” Heita called out to him, voice betraying the fact that he was on the verge of tears, and he stretched out a grasping hand—but Kuroh sharply rebuked him.

“Don’t move, Heita! Just hang on!”

With a pathetic moan, Keita curled himself into a ball, tightening his grasp. Kuroh took quick stock of the situation—it was a good three meters to Heita’s position from where he stood now...and twenty meters between Heita and the cliff bottom.

If he fell, Heita would, without a doubt, die instantly.

‘Calm down!’ he reminded himself. ‘You have to stay calm, Yatogami Kuroh.’

What would Ichigen-sama do in this situation? What would the man he looked up to do when faced with something like this? His voice rang out of its own accord, “It’s all right, Heita.” There was a slight tremor in his words, but he continued. “Don’t worry—I’m going to save you, Heita. So just—hang in there a little longer, all right?” Heita nodded, tears streaming down his face.

‘I should go back for some rope... Wait, no—it’s too late for that now. I can’t waste another second.’

Then came the ominous sound of the branch warping severely under Heita’s weight, a sight sure to turn anyone pale with fright. But Heita began to mumble an explanation of what had happened here, perhaps having noticed the branch bowing—perhaps not. “Kuro-chan—I got separated from my brothers, and then before I realized it, everyone had disappeared, so I wandered around all alone

for a while and then fell down this cliff...”

Kuroh stretched himself out as far as he could, but failed to reach Heita. ‘This isn’t good...’ A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek. ‘At this rate, Heita will...’ With all his strength, he stretched his muscles nearly to their breaking point, thrusting his arm downward.

And then—

The sound of something ripping—and a crack split the tree limb. In that instant, Heita glanced up at Kuroh, tears in his eyes, and smiled. “Kuro-chan.”

I don’t want to die.

Without an ounce of hesitation, Kuroh leapt into the air—managing to latch onto Heita’s body just before he collapsed into a free-fall. Heita grabbed on tight to Kuroh, eyes clenched shut, and Kuroh embraced the small body just as fiercely in return.

Gravity dragged the young pair downward with merciless force—



—and a light, brilliant as an explosion, snapped forward, extending. A line of brilliance stretched upward from Kuroh’s extended fingers, connecting with the man who had suddenly appeared at the cliff’s edge just before the pair hit the bottom of the ravine.

“We made it!”

Miwa Ichigen, drenched in sweat, called out in response from his stance at the top of the cliff, “Well done, Kuro!” and clasped his own hand over Kuroh’s invisible one.

Only moments later, Kuroh and Heita found themselves wrapped in Ichigen’s embrace before slumping down at the cliff’s edge. Heita wept without ceasing, but given that he’d only narrowly escaped the jaws of death, he could hardly be blamed.

Ichigen ran his fingers over the boys’ heads over and over, breath coming hard and fast. “You did so well...so so well—both of you. I’m so proud of you, truly!”

Kuroh grew childishly embarrassed of being cradled as he was and shifted himself to sit up properly, asking, “Umm, Ichigen-sama...” He couldn’t help it—he was curious. “Why...are you here? Weren’t you away on business?”

“Hm? Oh—well I had been on my way to visit Daikaku-san in Nanakamado, but then I suddenly had a vision of your predicament and I couldn’t possibly stay away.”

Just then, a rush of wind blew up from the cliff bottom, and before their very

eyes, a transport chopper lifted into the night sky, a bright searchlight brushing across the group. Ichigen smiled at long last, waving away the craft, and explained with a mischievous wink, “So I flew back.”

Kuroh could but stare in wonder; Ichigen truly was amazing, and he gained a renewed respect for his master that day.

Heita was well and thoroughly scolded when they returned, but he received even more fierce hugs through tears from his parents, and all of the villagers as well rejoiced from the bottom of their hearts that Heita had returned safely.

All assumed and accepted that Heita had been saved by Miwa Ichigen—and this was allowed, as letting it be known that the elementary school student Kuroh had ventured into the mountains at night, on his own, would invite more questions than it was worth the trouble to deal with.

This was why Kuroh had only let the elder two of the daifuku trio brothers know of his plans—and Heita kept his mouth shut about what had happened as well. But from that point on, Heita grew even more fond of Kuroh than he had been before, fixing upon him an expression of adoration not unlike the one Kuroh directed to Ichigen.

But one among the others seemed to have gathered just how deeply Kuroh had been involved in the whole affair—Watanabe-san.

“Kuroh-chan...?” She’d apparently noticed that Kuroh had disappeared for a period of time. “I understand if you don’t want to talk about it...but did you perhaps play some important part in saving Heita-chan...?” Kuroh smiled

uneasily, neither confirming nor denying her suspicions—and the woman pressed for no more, instead offering, “I see... Then I’ll just assume that you did something quite amazing. Is there anything I can do to reward you...?”

Kuroh cocked his head to the side at this question. “Then could I...please have you teach me how to cook?” First things first, and he added with a smile, “I’d really like to know how to make a delicious dashimaki omelet.”

Interlude 1: Slumbering

At length, Kuroh drew his reminiscence to a close with, “And so as you can see, Ichigen-sama was accomplished in a number of fields, such that I could not even hope to compare.” He crossed his arms in proud satisfaction.

“.....”

But when Yashiro delivered nothing in response, Kuroh furrowed his brow in concern and twisted in place to glance behind himself—

“*Zzz...*”

—where he found Yashiro, as expected, fast asleep—the expression on his face utterly at ease and worry-free.

Kuroh sighed softly. ‘I suppose he really was utterly exhausted...’ In a rather natural motion, he shifted off the bed and took up a blanket settling it across Yashiro—and his expression waxed gentle, reminiscent of times in the past when he’d done the same while looking after the daifuku trio as their elder. ‘...Such a strange fellow,’ he thought to himself. ‘A curious amalgam of mystery—with none able to discern what he’s thinking—and childish unguardedness... But the question is—which is his true self?’ Or perhaps... ‘...both aspects are part of his character?’

While he might have been a man of deception, who had tricked Kuroh from the moment they met, he was also the same man who had returned to that stadium to save Kuroh, at very real risk to his own life.

Yet laden within his words and actions seeming to suggest him flighty, thinking of nothing in particular at all, was an intelligence suggesting worldliness beyond measure and a calm, collective nature unbefitting his apparent age.

“He seems at once both good and evil...” His eyes narrowed to slits as he stared down at Yashiro. “I’m afraid...I still don’t understand you.”

Back in that stadium, he’d told Yashiro, stuck in a pit of despair, that, “I still haven’t figured you out”—and it had not been a lie. But that by no means meant that he’d deemed him, “Isana Yashiro the Good.” It was simply that he hadn’t come to a firm decision yet.

If he truly was the murderer of Totsuka Tatara, then...

“_____”

Kuroh’s eyes flashed with a dangerous glint, and he grasped Kotowari. ‘... Then I’ll be forced to put you down.’ This was the mission entrusted him, as he sat here protecting Isana Yashiro, traveling with him. ‘I suspect...we’re both dealing with our demons right now. I must face my duty, and you...must determine just who or what you truly are. But it’s beyond our control, I suppose. Neither of us can shoulder the other’s burden, whether we like it or not—even though we both face the same harsh reality...’

Kuroh took a breath, and then—“Kurosuke.”

A stiff voice called to him from behind, and he twisted about to find Neko standing nude, with nothing but a single towel wrapped around her frame—and

she stared straight at Kuroh, accusation clear on her features. "...You were thinking something weird just now, weren't you?"

Her gaze here shifted to his grip on Kotowari; likely she'd sensed something out of sorts and come out of the washroom to investigate.

Kuroh replied, not bothering to feign ignorance, "I was thinking about how I might have to kill Isana Yashiro."

At this, Neko let out a sound halfway between a Wha-?! and a feline screech, and her eyes bugged out. In the next instant, she executed an unbelievable bound, leaping straight up from the floor with next to no preparatory movements and bouncing off the television rack to do a half turn and land on the bed, rolling over on top of Yashiro to protect him. It was an acrobatic feat enough to wring unconscious admiration from Kuroh himself.

"Kurosukeee..." Her tone dipped deep and threatening. "If you lay one finger on my Shiro, I'll..."

The sleeping Yashiro squirmed uncomfortably, as Neko had her arms wrapped in an almost choke-hold around his neck. Neko, though, didn't seem to notice in the least, instead clutching Yashiro tightly and glaring at Kuroh through eyes that shined with a thin sheen of tears. "Shiro...Shiro is mine!"

"....." After a long silence, Kuroh snorted softly. "Calm yourself. I would never stoop so low as to slay someone in their sleep. If I'm going to take him down, it will be after I've made him well aware of his crimes."

"H-how is that supposed to calm me?! And you know, I've thought this for a

while, Kurosuke, but there's a lot that's 'off' with you! You're totally off-the-wall!"

"You're the last person I want to hear that from!" He caught himself after this outburst, though, and cleared his throat. "Ahem. And plus—" He attempted to regain his composure. "I haven't made a firm decision about him. As such, there's no reason for me to put him down. Not yet, at least. And just so you know...I don't particularly relish the thought of having to dispatch him either. That's how much I truly do want to believe in him."

These words clearly related his earnest feelings on the matter, and Neko fell silent—though there still remained a trace of wariness in her eyes.

"...I still don't quite trust you." She slid onto her side. "Shiro's all I need. So long as I have him, then...that's good enough for me." She nuzzled her cheek against Yashiro's chest affectionately.



Kuroh was well aware—with Neko, this girl whose true name itself was a mystery, underneath this bottomlessly cheerful, bright superficial personality there had to lurk another side: an obliquely negative one. Otherwise she would never have become so stubbornly, strongly attached to Yashiro as she was, given the relatively short while she'd known him.

As she'd put it, she had indeed made every effort to build for Yashiro his ideal

fantasy, a world in which he could feel utterly at ease—and in a way, she'd mostly succeeded, keeping the inhabitants of the entire island under control of her neural manipulations.

It wasn't overstatement to describe her powers as truly frightening.

‘Much as I hate to admit it, the Blue King was more wary of this girl back at the stadium than he was of me—and she's the one who ultimately saved us, too. While the plan may have been Shiro's...the Sword of Damocles she created fooled even the Blue King.’

Kuroh's and Neko's powers were so different in nature that it was nigh impossible to compare them, but he felt deep inside that...she was likely more powerful than he when it came to sheer stock.

Here, Kuroh distantly recalled Miwa Ichigen explaining that Strains could perhaps be referred to as, “Half-baked Kings.” ‘Though in truth, I can't even be sure that she is a Strain in the first place...’ He chuckled wryly to himself.

“Shiro, Shiro~♪” Neko began to tease Shiro, much like a real cat. Yashiro was content to snore away peacefully, but Neko didn't seem to mind.

Here, a question crossed Kuroh's mind. ‘That reminds me...Shiro mentioned that she just suddenly shifted from cat to human form one day out of the blue... If that's so, then why was she living with Shiro in feline form in the first place...?’ Thinking back on it now, this was indeed strange.

There would have been plenty of other, more appropriate ways for her to spend time with him, had that been her desire; she could have posed as a

classmate, or even convinced him she was his lover, or younger sister. Any would have been more natural and would have likely fit her feelings better, too.

‘So...why a cat?’

Kuroh settled one knee on the bed, opening his mouth to ask, “Hey, why did—”
—you become a cat?

Neko lifted her head ever so slowly at this, eyes glittering...

Chapter 2: I am A Cat!

The first thing she saw...was a vast, endless sky washing over pale.

When the huge sword crashed down from the heavens into the earth, all sound and color disappeared from the world, and she fluttered about in the air.

Strangely enough...it didn't hurt; there was no pain, and as her consciousness began to slip away, she cast her gaze about her surroundings, noting how beautiful the bright white brilliance enveloping her was.



She didn't know how she'd survived. She felt like perhaps she'd been saved by someone else, but then again perhaps not. And yet the first thing she did upon regaining consciousness, despite having next to no comprehension of who or where she was, was open her mouth to release a loud crying shout as she realized how drastically her surroundings had changed.

A few crumbling buildings remained, collapsed into a heap and set against a desolate backdrop seemingly not of this world. She could locate neither her father nor her mother, who she knew should have been with her, and with faltering footsteps, she began to wander the ruins.

She called for her father, called for her mother—and thinking back on it now, it was perhaps here that she first awakened to the power dwelling within.

Far, far away.

It was calling her, she felt, from some impossibly distant place.

Yet so near. Something was whispering to her from just near the pulse of her heart, and using that strange power, she finally located once more those who would protect her, those who loved her.

And she did it all unconsciously, with no skill or artifice whatsoever.

That power...planted within her the seeds of grief and pain, for a future that she would surely have to face.

Official documents recorded this instance of a sword plunging into the ground the Kagutsu Incident.

The moment Papa returned home, their house was transformed into a mansion in the middle of an oasis. Papa, decked out in true office drone fashion of a suit and necktie, traded these clothes for a turban and flowing silk material, stepping up from the entrance into the household proper.

“Morgiana,” he called out to Mama. “I’m home!”

“Oh, welcome back!” Mama, who’d just stepped out into the hallway, was also decked out in the trappings of some dancer from a faraway kingdom, the design rather extravagant with the way it exposed her stomach. “How was your latest voyage?” she questioned, tone utterly devoid of worry.

“Well, between being snatched up by Rocs and swallowed by sea monsters, I must say it was a rather trying day—but we still managed to make it back to dock safely. Here you are, my dear: treasures I retrieved from the secret mines.”

With this, he held out a bag for her overflowing gigantic diamonds and sapphires and the like.

“Oh my!” Mama merrily took the proffered jewels in hand. “You shouldn’t have! Thank you ever so much.” She lifted up onto her tiptoes, natural as anything, and pressed a kiss to Papa’s cheek. The pair behaved like newlyweds even now, seven years into their marriage.

Papa laughed a bit, happy, and headed into the vast living room. Several vast marble columns dotted the room, and a fountain glittering in rainbow hues with fish darting and cavorting in its spray sat in the center of the room. Furnishings gilded in gold and silver decorated the room, and a pelt was laid out on a raised level—with a young girl stretched out on her stomach atop it.

Her legs kicked up behind her to and fro, engrossed in her reading as she was, and Papa grinned broadly at her. “You’re quite the avid reader, I see, ???.”

“She really does seem to love that Collection of Children’s Masterpieces from Around the World you bought for her, Dear,” Mama explained, eyes crinkling in mirth.

This clever little girl was their pride and joy. Her scores on the intelligence test administered before entering kindergarten had tempted scores of specialists to visit for a closer examination. It wasn’t simply that she was smart—their little ???

was also equipped with a childish brightness and gentility as well.

Papa, Mama, and ???—this was their own little world.

Just then, an animal's low growl echoed through the chamber; just beyond the marble pillars stretched a vast park. "Oh my, it seems Shafshar is here."

"I see. Guess that means we need to get him some meat!"

The young couple's gaze was directed at a magnificent lion standing just beyond them, pawing the ground with his front paws in a demanding motion.

"Ah! Papa!" ???'s head shot up here—

—and in that instant, everything snapped back to normal. The mansion shifted back into a normal rented-out house, Papa back into his suit and Mama back into a dress—and the lion became the local wandering tomcat.

???’s face broke into a wide smile, and she launched herself at Papa. "Welcome home!" The book she had tossed aside...was *The Adventures of Sinbad the Sailor*.

??? had only relatively recently become aware of her powers. She was different from the other children at her kindergarten: none of the other children, after all, could allow others to experience the same fantastic scenes that played out in their minds, and realizing she could do this came as something of a shock.

She gained some measure of comprehension of her powers after reading several books her parents had bought for her, determining that the term she could use to best describe her abilities was, "Magician"—the old men with the long white beards that often popped up in children's fantasy novels.

These men could fell enemies with flashes of lightning and launch flaming balls of fire through the air. But ??? considered their most unique skill of all to perhaps be the ability to conjure images of imaginary monsters and grand palaces perched on cliffsides—in other words, the power of illusion.

‘I’m a magician, too!’ she had concluded.

There were two points on which she behaved particularly cleverly: the first was how she made sure to conceal her powers from those around her, the very books and shows she enjoyed so much informing her actions. In those tales, the beings known as Magicians were always revered for their great powers—but at the same time, they were also feared, living lonely, solitary lives deep in the wilds and forests.

“I certainly don’t want to wind up like that,” she’d told herself.

There had also been an anime airing around the same time centered around four young witches-in-training, and ??? had watched it, entranced, taking note of the fact that the girls in the show took great care to conceal their true identities from those around them.

Those with the ability to wield magic do not, as a rule, reveal this fact to anyone else—this is what ??? learned from her readings and anime viewings.

Of note, while ??? was happy to think herself a “magician”, not once did she refer to herself using the term “witch”—and this was simply because, “I don’t transform!” Indeed, this was the criterion she based her decision on.

The witches-in-training she saw on TV could transform themselves into

stylish adults and fight their enemies in cool, flashy costumes—and all she could really do was weave illusions. ‘So I’m not a witch...’ ??? had concluded, a bit dejected at the realization.

And then there was a second point on which she was cautious: ensuring that she had a proper grasp on just what kind of power she wielded. Just what sort of qualities did she possess? What was the range of effect? On whom could she effectively use her powers? These were the points on which ??? began her research, in a rather child-like fashion.

First, her parents. Then, her kindergarten teachers. Her friends and neighbors. The postman. She even went so far as to try using her powers on total strangers she’d never met before and the news anchors she saw on television.

Her experiments revealed the following: using her powers, she could envelop the entire town in illusion, making all of inhabitants believe it to be snowing despite it actually being a bright, sunny day. Everyone who stepped outside had made sure to don long boots and arm themselves with umbrellas, seemingly prepared to fight the elements.

However, given that—despite the lack of any real obstacles or hindrances whatsoever—several people did slip and fall, ??? had quickly dissolved the illusion in a panic.

It was this that had surprised even ??? herself; she’d never imagined her powers to be this great. The experiment, however, revealed something else as well: once she removed the illusion, all who had been under her spell completely and utterly forgot anything had happened whatsoever. More so, they

didn't simply experience a blackout or lapse in memory; they would instead rewrite everything they had been through in her illusions in line with their own ideas.

In the case of people who'd been caught out with their umbrellas to wield against the non-existent snow, they simple brushed this off as, "Well, I thought it looked like snow, so I brought my umbrella just in case. They said it might snow on the weather forecast, after all. Or perhaps an acquaintance mentioned it." In this way, they smoothly went about their daily lives, content with these faulty memories.

This is how ??? was able to from time to time invite her Mama and Papa into the fantastic worlds of Sinbad the Sailor or 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, confident that the moment she dissolved the illusion, everything would go back to normal. It had even gotten to the point nowadays where she would become so engrossed in whatever book she was reading that she unconsciously wove the illusions and pulled those around her in as well.

She'd also gradually come to understand that, should she lose concentration or start to focus on something else, her "spells" tended to become easier to break. She'd tried at one point to make those around her see her as a grown woman, but the effect had worn off naturally after a single night. In contrast, though, minor tweaks to her appearance—like making herself seem a few centimeters taller—she could keep going for as long as two months.

Discovering that the greater the distance between reality and the illusion she wanted to protect, the more difficult the task—had been an important realization

indeed.

Further, she also learned that her powers would not work on people and objects she couldn't directly perceive. And for some reason, she couldn't seem to cast any illusions on Tamagorou, the tomcat that occasionally dropped by ???'s home. Try as she might to influence the chubby black cat, the animal would just leisurely enjoy the food prepared by Mama and, after raking a glance over ???, trot off again.

On this particular day, as well, when ??? returned home from kindergarten, she found Tamagorou sprawled out napping on the veranda and quickly snuck up on him. "G'morning, Tamagorou."

The cat simply lifted his head and began washing himself, casting only a cursory glance at ???, seeming very put-out by her presence, and then returning to his bath. Given his build and the state of his coat, it was clear Tamagorou was getting up there in years. As Mama and Papa told it, he'd been roaming around this area from well before ??? had even been born.

He would shamelessly wander into people's homes, begging food off of them, and sometimes disappear for days at a time if the mood struck him. But despite his willful ways, rather than feeling disdain for the feline, quite the contrary, he was quite the popular pet amongst the locals.

Apparently the old man living next door had been the one to name him 'Tamagorou', but seeing as he was a tomcat living as he pleased, he naturally had no real name. Indeed, ??? had caught the piano teacher living four houses over calling him, "Kurou", while the butcher over in the shopping district called

him, “Chubby-chan.”

“.....”

??? stared, frozen, at Tamagorou, steeling her consciousness. A gray shade rose to the forefront of her mind, with several threads running through it, and while it may have seemed a tangled mass, it was in reality not so very complicated—and the emotion she gleaned from it all was satisfied, relaxed. “Seems like you’re in a good mood today, Tamagorou.”

She smiled to herself; ??? was able to, to a certain degree, divine the moods and emotions of other living things around her, a power that could be termed an extension of her abilities. Whenever she employed her powers of perception manipulation, she could—for a moment—reflexively pick up traces of the emotions of her targets. She would then adopt it as her own image and proceed to paint those emotions in the colors she imagined them to take on. It was thus in executing this requisition with lightning-quick speed that she was able to carry out her enchantments.

The procedure for spreading her illusion over the entire town followed much the same pattern; she’d brush across the emotions of some several hundred people—albeit quite cursorily—all at once, and then proceed to paint over their minds with the information she wanted them to soak in.

The reason she’d failed to influence the announcer on the TV had been due simply to the fact that she could not seize control of the announcer’s thoughts through the television screen. In other words, the range of her powers was limited to the area in which she could directly sense her targets’ minds.

However, ??? didn't actually understand this in such detail—she simply knew that if she could read her target's mind, it made it easier to use her powers.

And right now—‘All right... Let's give it another shot!’ She would once again try to exert her perception altering powers on Tamagorou.

She steadily fixed her gaze on Tamagorou's, imbuing within the animal the belief of I am a human.

Tamagorou silently stared back with yellow, bead-like eyes—before opening his mouth into a wide yawn, stretching, and flopping over onto his back, baring his belly—fur shot through with white strands—for all to see. No matter how you looked at it, it was clear this was not an animal that believed himself a human.

???’s shoulders slumped in defeat; as she'd suspected, it seemed her illusions didn't work on Tamagorou. While she couldn't yet determine if this was a shortcoming true of all cats, or if Tamagorou was simply special, she actually found that rather than feeling disappointed...she actually felt a swell of admiration.

Her powers could sway proper adults like Mama and Papa and her kindergarten teachers, and yet this single black cat could shake off her illusions with ease. ‘He's amazing...’ she thought to herself with some awe and reached forward to rub Tamagorou's stomach. She resolved here to practice using her powers on other non-human animals as well in the future, when—

“Tamagorou!” came a hoarse voice, and ??? perked up in surprise. “Tamagorou!” The call was coming from rather nearby, and an old man dressed

in gray Japanese-style clothing and a straw hat poked his head over the chest-high bamboo fence separating ???’s house from the neighboring plot. “Tamagorou!”

??? froze in place, but Tamagorou actually responded seemingly happily, and he trotted off in the direction of the voice with a meow~, jumping down into the garden and slipping through the bamboo fence into the neighboring property.

“Oh, Tamagorou! There you are, good boy!” He directed his gaze downward slowly; it seemed that after passing through the bamboo fence, Tamagorou had proceeded to rub himself up against the old man’s legs affectionately. This was the old man who lived next door—and the same one who had named this vagabond black cat ‘Tamagorou’.

When ??? ducked a bow in his direction, he called out, “You doin’ good?” with a broad smile plastered on his face.

One eye had started going cloudy white from cataracts, and he only had a few teeth left in his mouth by this point, but ??? responded politely, “Yes, just fine, thanks,” before quickly standing and retreating inside.

Truthfully, she found the man a bit frightening. In the past year or so, his mind had started to go; he would occasionally forget the face of his own son, and Mama had said that he’d been seen wandering aimlessly around the area in the middle of the night. When she dared a glance over her shoulder—she found the man still grinning widely and watching her.

Almost unconsciously, she brushed across the man’s mind—and found no

organized thoughts or emotions whatsoever, simply a dark, muddled, confused mass. It sent a chill down her spine, and she hastily fled inside.

The man continued to speak to her, but she'd now come too far to catch his words any more, thinking to herself, 'I can't understand that man's feelings... So my powers probably wouldn't work on him.'

At dinner that evening, Mama and Papa chatted about the old man from next door. Apparently he was causing no small amount of irritation among others in the neighborhood, knocking on strangers' doors and busting into loud song in the middle of the night and such.

"I really would like to do as much as we can for him. He's so very fond of ???, after all," her mother commented, a very kind-hearted person, but her father gave a wry chuckle.

"True, but...it's really none of our business. It's best to leave these sorts of things to a professional."

Sitting in her child's seat while she listened to the adults' conversation, she thought to herself, 'I hope Jiji never gets like that...'

While her maternal grandfather had already passed away, her paternal grandfather was still in good health. Living only some few hundred meters away, he occasionally dropped by to dote on ???. The very rice bowl she was eating out of right now, even, had been a present from her grandfather at her birth; it was decorated with an image of a dragon set against a white background.

Even for the clever ???, though, it was difficult to comprehend the concept of ‘aging’.

‘Please let him never get like that...!’ she prayed, fiercely distinguishing her own grandfather from the man next door with the harsh innocence of a child.

After she finished eating, ??? made sure to brush her teeth, take a bath, and then prepare for bed, at which point she crawled underneath the covers of her futon and began to read her book. The piece she’d chosen to enjoy before drifting off to sleep this evening was, “An Old Japanese Tale”, a story from the Collection of Children’s Masterpieces from Around the World which her father had gifted her.

She would later come to realize that this...was a poor choice, as hidden within the pages of this story were several rather frightening tales, such as one about a temple ward who barely escaped with his life after being captured by an old hag, or another about a snow woman who froze a young man in ice, or another about a Buddhist priest being possessed by wandering spirits on the site of an ancient battle and mutilating his own ears.

It was too much.

Translated for children’s understanding though the stories may have been, they hadn’t lost one iota of their original terror, and—perhaps to amplify the sense of realism—the pages were decorated with gruesome illustrations.

The old hag reaching out twig-like fingers to try and grab the young ward, a snow woman grinning broadly as she breathed out a stream of ice particles, the

spirits of fallen soldiers closing in on a man, his skin covered in sutras. Such images could be found scattered about at important points in the stories, clearly demonstrating the care with which the book had been edited.

??? was now thoroughly spooked, though, and set the book off to the side. She draped a blanket over her head and tried to fall asleep—but shortly became aware of an unignorable urge; she needed to use the bathroom.

Her mother would soon be by to give her a goodnight kiss, so she thought about waiting until then at least—but the urge eventually became unbearable, and steeling herself, she darted out from under the covers and made her way to the downstairs bathroom.

After finishing her business, she called out to her mother, who was washing dishes in the kitchen, and started up the stairs to return to her room. Noticing light seeping from Papa's study, she peeked inside and found her father sitting in his chair reading a paperback. You could say that ??? got her love of reading from her father.

He slowly sipped on whiskey from the thick tumbler in his hand, turning the pages as he read. This room was filled to the brim with Papa's book collection.

“Papa?” she called out.

He turned to her with a gentle expression on his face. “What’s wrong, ???? Can’t sleep?” ??? could sense a great deal of love from him with this, and her face broke into a broad smile.

Feeling like she wanted a bit of attention, she asked, “Whatcha readin’ Papa?”

He took the old book in hand. “Oh, this? Well, this happens to be called Wagahai wa Neko de aru—or ‘I am a Cat’. I first read it quite some time ago, but I like to go back through and reread it again now and then.”

???’s first impression was Well that’s a funny title. “What’s it about?”

At her question, Papa’s expression waxed thoughtful. “Hmm...hard to explain. It’s a story about a cat who’s the pet of a university professor.”

“A story about a cat?”

“Indeed. It’s quite entertaining, telling about how a cat sees the world of humans.”

???’s eyes grew wide with wonder. “...What’s ‘wagahai’ mean?”

Papa laughed at this. “Yes, I suppose you’re a bit too young to know that word just yet. It’s a personal pronoun—kind of like the ones we use today for ‘I’ and ‘me’, words we use to refer to ourselves.”

At his explanation, ??? responded, “I see... So then, the cat’s calling himself ‘wagahai’?” Here, an image of Tamagorou sprang to mind, and ??? found herself idly wondering if he would just that word to refer to himself as well.

Papa laughed wryly. “Well, that’s not really the point; the story’s trying to describe, from the viewpoint of a cat, the humor and strangeness inherent in human society. This literary genre is called ‘satire’. As such, the author has the cat act overly important and use a pompous pronoun like ‘wagahai’ to refer to himself, thereby elevating himself over the humans around him.”

But of course, ??? still didn’t quite understand, and as she sat there blinking

dumbly, Papa gently patted her head. “I’m sure you’ll understand better when you get a bit older. And then, you can borrow this.”

“Really??” Her eyes sparkled; there was little doubt that this book contained an amazingly interesting story. After all, Papa had reread it dozens of times—and his expression as he’d run his eyes over the page had made it obvious he was enjoying himself. “Promise?”

“Promise,” he responded with a chuckle, and the pair linked fingers to seal their vow.

Mama entered here, wiping her hands on her apron. “Oh my—and what might you two be up to?” Apparently she’d finished the dishes now. “What?” she pressed at Papa’s teasing expression.

“Oh, just teaching our daughter here a bit about literary theory.”

Mama’s eyes crinkled with mirth, and she settled her hands on her hips. “Well that’s all well and good, but isn’t it about time for ??? to be in bed?”

“Yes ma’am~” she replied, waving her hands around in a clownish fashion and eliciting laughter from her parents.

After being promised to be attended to by Mama, ??? returned to her room and dove under her covers, at which point Mama gently patted her down. “Good night.” She offered a smile steeped in affection before making her exit, leaving only the night light still lit. Despite her age, ??? wasn’t scared in the least of sleeping alone, as if she just expanded her senses a bit, she could brush against the gentle feelings of love and affection streaming from her Mama and Papa.

She was blessed with the ability to sense their love whenever she pleased.

Today, as any other day, she was bathed in the full measure of their affection as their feelings seeped in from every corner of the room. ??? cast a satisfied glance about her room, taking in the superhero action figures and soccer ball and such; all presents from her parents.

‘They really do treasure me...’

With such thoughts dancing about in her mind, ??? slowly drifted off into slumber.

Such was how ??? passed most of her days. Small though she may have been, she was blessed with marked beauty and enjoyed popularity among her kindergarten schoolmates as well as the teachers and other adults around her. “As adorable as she is now, she could very well become some famous entertainer or actress when she’s older!” mused the mothers who came by to pick up their children in the afternoons, setting a flush to ???’s cheeks.

Indeed, her world was quite steeped in affection directed her way. Everyone doted on her, everyone wanted to chat with her, everyone wanted to have some relationship with her. All told, the only one who seemed loath to pay her due attention was the cat Tamagorou.

However...in the midst of such a comfortable, satisfying situation, every once in a while—only occasionally, mind you—something happened...that sent ripples across the otherwise calm waters that were ???’s life.

And it almost always involved the old man next door.

On this particular day, ??? was playing in front of her home, as usual, when the old man strode up out of nowhere—freezing ??? where she stood.

“Ah...ah...” he called out in a slow, dulled voice. His form cast a long shadow on the ground, and his toothless mouth hung open in a dark, gaping maw. “Ya... yaa...” His hoarse, gravelly voice slipped through the evening air and echoed in ???’s ears, seeping inside.

She tried to seek refuge in the house, but the man was standing directly in the path leading to her entryway, and she couldn’t move a muscle.

“□□□□□□□,” he spoke, releasing a stream of unintelligible words, and ??? failed to grasp exactly what he was saying.

“□□□□□□□,” he tried again, but ??? still could not understand. The man drew a step closer, and ??? took one back in response. He cocked his head, and the sunlight streaming from behind him cast his face in deep shadow.

“□□□□? □□□□□ □□□?” And then, in a flash—she suddenly understood his speech, her mind finally aligning his words properly. He’d been saying, “So, you’re a little girl now, huh? I’m sorry. □□□□ — how long have you been a little girl?”

She shuddered, as if a cold bucket of water had just been dumped over her. ‘This old man...!’ She trembled, reminding herself, ‘He’s just crazy in the head! He’s so far gone, he’s even forgotten what his own son looks like!’ If she hadn’t consoled herself in this manner, she likely would have slumped to the ground. Her heart thudded in her chest like an alarm, and her head ached, like it was

being split open.

It felt...

It felt like something important...was shattering, and she unthinkingly released a high-pitched screech.

“□□□?” the man called, someone else’s name this time. A boy’s name—one ??? had never heard of before. The man appeared to her as some demonic form, a monster.

“Mrrrow~” Just then...came the lazy cry of a cat, a pleading meow steeped in vitality yet still brazenly bold, begging for attention. The world slowly but surely took on color again, and ???’s vision cleared.

The being standing before her cast in the hues of the setting sun was neither a demon nor a monster, but an old man, a relaxed smile on his features. A black cat jumped down from atop a nearby concrete wall. “Oh, Tamagorou!” The old man sluggishly took the cat into his arms and lifted it up. The cat released a purr from deep in its throat, and the man proceeded to rub the animal’s head with shaky fingers.

??? didn’t miss her chance. “I’m leaving now!” and with that, she darted around the old man and raced into the entryway of her home.

“Ah—” he man started, obviously about to protest, but she didn’t wait to hear him, instead slamming the door shut. After locking it tightly, she twisted around and kept her back pressed firmly against it.

Tears rose to her eyes for some reason, “No, that’s...that’s not it...” she

unconsciously reminded herself. “It’s not—it’s not.” She was so very, very sad... yet she didn’t understand why—so she therefore explained away her emotions with, ‘That—stupid Tamagorou!’ blaming the little black cat inside her mind. ‘Don’t get close to that weird old man!’

But even she understood that she was only deceiving herself.

For a child ???’s age, forgetting such unhappy incidents was not a difficult feat, and as each day brought about new adventures, the things which the old man had spoken naturally faded away through no effort of ???’s own. Reading books, playing with friends, chatting with her parents—through these activities, the feelings of unease and fear that ??? had experienced in that moment eventually calmed, and ???’s days eventually settled back to their normal, fulfilling state.

But by no means had those feelings disappeared entirely.

Like a thorn, they dug down deep into young ???’s memories, to the weakest, most sensitive portion of her psyche, and sometimes—only sometimes—if she dropped her guard, she’d catch her heart throbbing with a sharp pain.

It was at moments like these that she would grow flustered and shake her head, reminding herself, ‘That man...that was just crazy talk,’ and, ‘I shouldn’t concern myself with him. All those frightening things...none of it was real.’

When she heard that the old man had been admitted to a nursing home, she felt a rush of relief, with an openness which shocked even herself as she danced a little jig of joy with Thank goodness and Finally!.

She did feel a twinge of regret, though. ‘I hope he finds some peace there...’ she prayed, bringing her hands together. ‘Please let that old man find happiness there.’

To ???, though, this meant a return to truly, honestly peaceful days now. She was certain of it. An almost perhaps a bit too convenient life—but nevertheless one that was happy and safe and kind. A life where she was doted on by her mother and father, loved by them—one where she loved them in return. A lovely life.

Perhaps the only source of disappointment in this turn of events, though, was that in tune with the old man disappearing from the house next door...so too did Tamagorou disappear as well.

On this day, when Mama left to go shopping, she had reminded ???, “Be sure to close the door behind me, all right?””

And ???, being a good little girl, had replied, “Yes ma’am~” from her spot on the sofa where she was reading a book.

She knew, without a doubt, that she had locked the door—but when she happened to turn and glance behind her...she found four strange men sitting at their little four-person table. She hadn’t sensed their presence at all—they’d just popped up out of nowhere, like magic.

“Hey there. Sorry for the intrusion,” one greeted, expression decidedly unimpressed.

??? couldn’t even find the strength to be shocked; she just froze stiff in place.

Another spoke up, clarifying, “We monitor all entities endowed with special powers.”

“Sorry for just barging in—we’ll only take at most 15 minutes of your time.”

A third added, “We’re here from the Nanakamado Chemotherapy Research Center.”

The fourth clarified, “The Center’s run under the auspices of the Gold Clan. We primarily focus our efforts on researching Strains.”

??? hadn’t the first clue what these men were talking about, gaping stupidly, and the men cast uncertain glances at one another.

“Perhaps...we ought to explain our goals using layman’s terms?”

“But her mental faculties should be more than sufficient to...”

“That’s not the issue—simply...be a bit more sensitive to her situation.”

“I knew we should have brought along someone licensed in childcare...”

The men traded quips back and forth between one another. Between their markedly similar dress and way of speaking—devoid of any inflection—the men seemed disturbingly lacking in personality, unsympathetic to their fellow man. They continued their conversation amongst themselves, expressions gloomy and utterly ignoring ???.

But strangely enough...??? didn’t fear these men. However, she did feel a quiet sense of foreboding at what these men would likely speak to her about. She didn’t understand what they spoke of...but she felt it was already too late.

“You took a test when you first entered kindergarten, remember? One where you had to draw lots of different pictures, or identify the object that didn’t belong in an image?” the first man spoke, his words dry.

His companion didn’t wait for ???’s reply, adding, “You see—in rather complicated terms, that was a test to evaluate your ‘Induction Variation Drift’. In addition to assessing basic intelligence, the test is also used to identify special ability users. We administer that test across a range of institutions in an effort to track down special ability users in need of our protection or collection.”

“Little girl.” The third man peered into her eyes as he spoke, “You have special powers, don’t you?”

Tears welled up in ???’s eyes, and she bit down hard on her lip, furiously shaking her head.

The men sighed, and the fourth man announced in a ruthless tone, “We’ve subjected you to a two-week inspection period, monitoring you carefully from afar—and we’ve drawn our conclusions. You are, without a doubt, a strain, endowed with the power to alter others’ perceptions of reality. In fact, your powers are some of the strongest we’ve ever had the pleasure of witnessing.”

This phrasing tugged at her. “Are you...talking about my magic?” she sobbed, and at the sight of this little girl breaking down before them, the men fell silent, before responding at once:

“Indeed.”

“That would be correct.”

“Ah, no—not quite—”

“Well, strictly speaking, no.”

After responding thusly, they all fell silent again. ??? was crying full force now—nothing made sense anymore. What was she? What had she done?

A moment’s silence passed, and the first man spoke up again. “You’re a very sharp young lady. That much was obvious from our test. So I’m going to speak to you now assuming that you’ll understand what it is I’m going to say. You... have committed a grievous error against those you live with.”

The second man clarified, “But you did it with no ill will.”

The third, now: “And while we understand that...”

The fourth: “You’ve kept these people you’re convinced are your parents...in a constant state of perception alteration.”

You aren’t really their child.

Someone among the four said that, and a shudder rippled through ???’s body, like an ice-cold hand wrapping chilled fingers around her heart and squeezing.

“You’re deceiving even yourself.”

“You’ve carried out continual perception manipulation—”

“—and we simply cannot ignore this act.”

“Now, we’d like to get this over with without any fuss.”

The men extended their hands toward her, and as one demanded, “Please, come with us.”

“GO AWAY!” ??? screeched, and a preternatural light shone from her eyes.

Five minutes later...

The men had finally left the house; they ought to have forgotten that she even existed, and while they might remember what they'd come for once they'd left the area in which her powers would affect them, it would take at least a few hours. They'd also likely come more prepared next time.

But ??? didn't care anymore. She flung herself onto the ground and began to sob.

Everything made sense now. The things the old man had said. The reason there were so many toys in her room that didn't seem appropriate for a little girl. And—that corner of the living room she'd almost unconsciously avoided.

She took a deep breath and purposefully deactivated her powers...and when she lifted her head, she forced her gaze to take in what she saw.

A sobbing moan slipped from her lips.

Before her sat a small shrine, long-neglected, for the dead child. The real son of her 'parents'. She'd deceived these people for a long time—she understood that clearly now.

The words she'd hoped to hear were, “Even if you're not our real child—” “—you're still our dear little ???!”

The moment the man and woman she'd called Papa and Mama returned home, they let out a wail of despair. With ??? finally releasing them from her hold over the pair, it was as if the thick ice they'd been trapped within just melted away,

everything taking on a dawning clarity of realization.

Realization...that they'd forgotten their beloved son ever even existed.

The woman clung to the little shrine, weeping as she apologized to her child. The bouquet it had been decorated with had long ago wilted and withered, and the smiling face staring out from the picture frame was stained and dark from years of neglect. The man's fist was clenched at his side, seemingly at a loss for how to deal with the confusion and anger bubbling up within him.

It was frightening. So frightening.

She couldn't summon the strength to call out to the man and woman. She wanted, so badly, to apologize to the pair—to explain that it was her fault, that this was all her doing, but she couldn't bring herself to come down from the second story, instead curling herself up into a shivering ball, knees to her chest, in her closet.

Yet she couldn't avoid sensing the woman's despair and the man's horror mixed with resentment. She longed to be able to close off her mind, to stop the information from seeping in, but her powers would not grant her even this tiny reprieve—as if punishing her for the grave sin of deceiving these poor people all these years.

She was being forced to taste the pain and misery of these people she'd loved so dearly. A constant reminder of just how wrong she'd been. How her very existence was a sin.

'I'm sorry,' she cried, begging for forgiveness from anyone who'd ever been

involved with her. ‘I’m so sorry.’

This man and woman had had a son they’d lost at a young age. On that day when the great sword had plummeted to earth, the couple had been among those helping with relief efforts, taking into their care a young girl who couldn’t even walk yet.

They hadn’t even realized...that she had taken over their memories of their own real child. She’d skillfully taken on the role of their child.

‘I didn’t know, though! I swear, I didn’t realize what I was doing! I really thought I was your daughter!’

Ironically, the only one who’d twigged to anything strange about ???’s existence had been the old man, lost in his own world. Only he—and he alone—had remembered the real child who’d once lived here.

Unable to bear it anymore, ??? rose to her feet. “...Papa! Mama!” Weeping, she flung herself out of the closet. She just wanted to be able to call them that again. She wanted them to wrap her in hugs again, to dote on her again. To smile at her again.

She wanted them to call her name again.

She darted down the stairs—and for just a moment, she dreamed a dream in which her Mama and Papa took her in once again, as if nothing had happened, and they lived happily ever after.

But—the man and woman she saw when she reached the living room stood frozen, eyes wide in fear.

“Eek!” Mama shrieked, expression stiff, and she rebuffed ???’s advances; she’d always been so kind and gentle before...

Papa, who’d doted on her so lovingly, screamed, “MONSTER! You keep back, monster!”

??? froze in place, the words echoing over and over in her ears. The woman scrambled sluggishly away, almost as if she were swimming, to escape ???, shrieking in fright all the while. She quickly disappeared from ???’s field of vision, as if scared that even a simple touch might rob her of her life. She didn’t even glance back.

The man followed behind, tossing a threatening glare in ???’s direction. “Stay back! Don’t you dare come near us, monster!”

It was a tone one might use when speaking to some filthy creature, and his eyes shone with hatred. ??? could only watch in silent shock as they took their leave, fleeing the house.

She sat there in the living room...as if all her strings had just been snapped. She couldn’t even weep anymore. She’d forgotten what it meant to be sad.

All she could think...was, ‘Oh... I always thought I was a magician...’

but I guess I was just a monster all along

??? continued to sit, for hours on end, in the empty, darkening living room, completely at a loss.

‘Papa...Mama... I wonder what happened to those two?’

As she was wondering this, a soft meow~ reached her from the garden. It was Tamagorou—

—and for the first time, so suddenly, she could finally...sense the cat's feelings. He was thinking, 'Ojiichan?'

“Meow~”

‘Ojiichan? Where’d you go?’

“Meooooow~”

‘I’ve been looking for him all over... But I just can’t find him...’

I miss him



Tears welled up, and ??? stood. She yanked the door to the veranda open and headed out into the garden. “Tamagorou—the old man, he...” She furiously rubbed away her tears with a fist. “He’s not here anymore. He doesn’t live next door now.”

Just as she’d expected, Tamagorou was seated beside one of the trees in the garden, staring in her direction, seemingly a bit taken aback. And while it was

unclear whether or not he understood her words, he turned away sharply and darted up over the wall, taking his leave.

She had a strong suspicion...that the cat would never return here again, and she smiled through her tears.

She finally understood what it was she ought to do.

Heading back into her room, ??? took out a crayon and drawing paper, penning the following:

I'm sorry.

She could think of nothing else, but then added for the man and woman who'd temporarily heaped on her love and affection, *Thank you. Thank you so much.*

At the end, she added her name, considering leaving this place. 'Monsters can't live with proper humans.' With her decision made, bound to make it on her own, a more appropriate solution came to mind.

'Yeah... I can just do that...!'

She would perform the most powerful magic she ever had thus far in her life.

'I'll become a cat.'

A strong, noble, gentle creature.

'Yes, a cat.'

She'd cast an illusion on herself; one that would enable her to live on her own. Strongly, like Tamagorou. So she could survive alone.

Until the day came that someone...would accept her for who she really was.

‘Become...a cat...’

Become a cat...and live on her own.

‘What was it cats called themselves? Papa...that man, he said it was... Oh, right!’

So, she shouted: “I’m a cat! Wagahai wa neko de aru!”

And thus...she became a cat.

Interlude 2: Quarrelling

Neko remained silent for an unnaturally long period, and at length, she replied brightly, “Dunno!” cocking her head with a smile. “I’ve never been really good with remembering stuff from long ago! Guess I forgot!”

“.....”

Kuroh fell silent, staring sharply at Neko before releasing a soft sigh, questioning, “...Then why...are you crying?”

Tears began to flow despite her smile, streaming down in rivulets over her pale skin and dropping with a plip plop down onto the sheets and pillow and even Yashiro’s face. Her expression melting into one of shock, Neko breathed, “Wh...what?” She hastily rubbed at her face with the back of her hand, an action reminiscent more of a young woman than a cat. “I’m...crying?” Kuroh nodded. “But...why?”

“.....”

Kuroh remained mum, and Neko continued, marveling at herself in genuine confusion, “Why? Why am I crying...?”

“.....” Kuroh finally replied softly, “...No clue,” adding in a murmur, “I just don’t get it myself...”

There are some things that only those who’ve experienced untold pain can understand. ‘This girl...’ Kuroh’s eyes narrowed in sympathetic pity; it was blatantly obvious that something unspeakably tragic had happened in Neko’s

past. However, he couldn't bring himself to prod any further at her likely unconsciously sealed-away memories with his words. "It's quite a mystery..." he murmured, shaking his head.

Neko grimaced, and she piped up through a new wave of tears, "Ah! I'll bet it's because I'm so happy!" She then nuzzled close to Yashiro, smiling as she wept. "After all, I got to meet Shiro! I got to meet him, and it made me so happy I burst into tears!" She proceeded to rub her cheek against Yashiro's, chirping his name through giggles, in a manner which Kuroh likened to at once both affection for a loving, doting father and clinging to a lover she hadn't seen in ages. "I met Shiro...the person I've been searching for all this time..."

"....." Kuroh thought to himself, 'She's probably...speaking the truth...' For Neko, Isana Yashiro was, in all likelihood, a ray of hope she'd finally managed to find; a shelter meant to sweep away all despair and help her survive. 'I suppose that's why she's striving so hard to protect her place with Shiro...' She was a strange sort, he concluded.

For both Neko and himself, this man known as Isana Yashiro had drastically altered the course of their lives. Simply by association with this person, whose true identity remained shrouded in mystery, they'd found themselves being hunted by Clans both red and blue, at risk of life and limb, and now were stuck holed up in some sleazy love hotel.

'I never thought I'd find myself in a place such as this...' he reflected with a light flush to his cheeks. More so, he likely never would've been given reason to strike up a conversation with Neko as he was now were it not for their

connection through Yashiro.

But twigging to the fact that her past wasn't all that clear in her own mind, Kuroh took care in his probing, an emotion not far removed from that of caring for one's comrades by not wanting to unnecessarily hurt her. 'No...I suppose it's more akin to feelings for one's partners-in-crime...'

Here he was, spending his days in the company of this Isana Yashiro character, a murderer who, given half a chance, was prone to spouting the most ridiculous lies, experiencing some odd sense of solidarity with these people he now shared his fate with.

'He truly is a strange sort...'

This man who forged a sort of bond between Kuroh and Neko, who otherwise had absolutely nothing in common—Isana Yashiro.

'Just what are you, really? Good, evil...or some amalgamation of both...?' Kuroh fixed his gaze on Yashiro's once more, expression waxing grave. 'I want...to know more about you...'

But only moments later, that serious mien slipped into a rather comical one, as just beyond his gaze, a rather 'indecent' scene was unfolding. "Urk..."

Neko lay snuggled against Yashiro, merrily nuzzling away, but her movements had caused her bath towel to slip down, leaving her in an exceedingly bewitching state.

To put it bluntly, her breasts were completely exposed.

"H-HEY." Kuroh frantically moved to stop Neko, sensing this to be a Very Bad

Thing. “Don’t–do that! It’s not right! Now see here–put on some proper clothes!” He’d lost count of how many times he’d said such things since meeting Neko.

Neko glanced up at Kuroh with a decidedly put-out expression on her features–then suddenly sat up. “Pipe down, Kurosuke!” She poked him here with a finger in censure.

“NWAH!” He scrambled away; when she’d twisted around to face him full on, he’d been immediately greeted with her body in much the same form as she’d been born: Pale skin. Shapely breasts. A smoothly curving line from her hips down her long legs.

The towel had all but fluttered to the floor by now.

Kuroh’s vision swam as if caught in some strange light, and he screeched, “STOP! Put some clothes on, PLEASE. For the love of–just put some clothes on!”

“Hmph!” Neko merely seemed put-out that her lovely time with Shiro had been rudely interrupted. She settled her hands at her hips, snapping, “You’re just a big pervert deep down inside, Kurosuke!”

“I–‘m what?!” He attempted a glare in her direction, but after catching a glimpse of her bare skin, he once again covered his eyes with his arms.

At this, Neko let out a triumphant laugh. “Just like Shiro said! You get flustered when you see me naked, so that means you must be a nasty pervert underneath it all!”

“Ngh—why you...ISANA YASHIRO!” His wrath was well and truly roused against Yashiro for the first time in quite a while, and he grit his teeth in anger. Just what kind of language was this man teaching Neko?!

Neko, though, simply crossed her arms, scoffing, “I had to promise Shiro I’d always wear clothes because otherwise closet pervs like Kurosuke would get out of hand—do you have any idea how inconvenient that is?!”

Kuroh shot back, “D—do you even understand why it’s not good for you to run around nude?!”

“Mm...” Her arms still crossed, Neko cocked her head in thought. “...Because girls’ naked bodies are really scary?” She then smirked, laughing, “Oh I see now... So all this time you’ve been scared of my body!” She slowly shifted up into a stance.

Kuroh winced, wary of what she might try, when she belted out a loud laugh, bringing her hands to her mouth. “Here you go, Kurosuke! Behold my nude form!” She then bounced from the bed and landed right in front of Kuroh, brightly flaunting her full body.

“EEK—”

Yatogami Kuroh—who had treated his skirmish with Yata Misaki of the Red Clan as little more than child’s play and gone toe-to-toe, never backing down an inch, with the Blue King Munakata Reishi—let out a sound he’d never once made before no matter how many he faced down on the field of battle. “WOULD—YOU—QUIT THAT! YOU INDECENT WENCH!”

“Wait up, Kurosuke!” Neko leapt off in chase after Kuroh, who’d made a break for it. Given the fact that they both possessed extraordinary physical abilities, the rather cramped little bedroom quickly devolved into the site of a rather strange, convoluted game of tag. Dust whirled up, furniture toppled—and when Kuroh slammed into the mirror, it shattered, cracks springing up and marring the reflection.

Neko let out a teasing roar, and through it all, Isana Yashiro lay on the bed, brows furrowed and softly moaning, and dreamed.

Chapter 3: O'er East and West

The man sauntered through the early Spring streets of Dresden. The city had flourished as the imperial municipality of the Albertiner line, decked out with heavy Italian influences with buildings erected in the traditional Baroque architecture and and flagstone streets lining its pathways. The scenery all around told of the city's storied history, and the chill breeze blowing through the streets carried with it the faint scent of iron and horses and baking bread.

As one raised in an environment of paper and trees and rice, the man wouldn't have been faulted for feeling more than a bit out of place here, but he found himself, strangely enough, actually feeling rather comfortable with the setting.

Passersby glanced him over, thinking his attire rather strange for a soldier in the German forces, but one look at his face revealed that he was of Asiatic descent. His uniform was cinched tight about his waist with a high collar and a green hue to the fabric and tall, well-polished boots finished off with a peaked cap that, just as the Germans' did, rose a bit higher in the center. On his lapels, against a background of yellow sat two orange stripes and two stars. Anyone would be able to tell with a glance that this man was a first lieutenant in the Japanese Army.

However, in these parts, markedly few had ever even seen a Japanese person to begin with. Given the city's proximity to the border, it wasn't rare for them to have foreign visitors even during times of piece, but these migrants were mostly of eastern and southern European descent, and few non-Westerners aside from

the occasionally Chinese or gypsy traveler frequented the city.

Given the increasing number of refugees from the eastern areas piling into their city, the citizens had grown accustomed to seeing unfamiliar faces wandering about, but it was still a strange sight indeed to have someone of Japanese descent show up.

“.....”

A child with blond hair and blue eyes and patchwork clothing paused to openly gape at the man, entranced by the man's glossy black hair and deep, dark eyes. The man returned the gaze, expressionless, lips not even quirking up into a smile. At length, the boy's mother rushed over, frantic, and dragged him away without even offering so much as a nod for the man—clearly she was wary of these foreigners in their midst.

But the man didn't seem to mind in the least, continuing to stoically stride forward, and at length, he naturally blended in with the buzz of the city—his imposing physique being one reason he didn't stand out too much in this Aryan city. His build was strong and solid, with broad shoulders that weren't to be outdone by the strapping young men of the city, and while he'd had to slump a bit when he moved about in Japan lest he bump his head on the lintel, he could spread his wings here in this foreign country. At the very least, he had never experienced any issues related to his size in his travels.

The trip via overnight train that had carried him here from Berlin had gone quite pleasantly, and he'd grown rather fond of the beer he enjoyed frequently with the greasy local fare.

However, the primary reason that the man attracted next to no attention from his surroundings as he passed through lay in the way he walked—striding forward with no semblance of stiffness to him, footsteps nearly silent, each step controlled and practiced, no false moves, as learned in a judo or kendo dojo.

It was this manner of walking that kept any notice of his presence to the bare minimum. If any other military men had been present then, he likely would have been instantly flagged as someone with an unfathomable amount of power—but as it stood, no such others were around, and so the man was left to but march forward through this unfamiliar land with an even expression.

“.....”

The savory fragrance of roasting meat drifted through the air, and the man gave a sharp sniff, twisting his neck to glance around. In a corner of an alley sat a vendor’s cart stocked with sausage, pretzels, hot wine and the like, apparently the source of the appetizing smell.

Wartime though this might have been, Dresden showed little signs of having suffered any bomb raids and retained a greater share of salable goods than the surrounding cities, and while it wasn’t as bustling as it had been in years past, the city could still be said to be prosperous.

The man headed for the cart, which was being seen to by an old man with a white beard and a gentle face. “Hallo, bitte sehr,” he greeted in his native tongue, expression waxing a bit bewildered—but the man quickly dispelled his worries.

“Hallo, es ist immer noch so kalt. Kann ich eine Wurst haben?” (“Hey; still

quite chilly out, eh old man? Can I get one of those sausages from you?”)

The old man was visibly relieved to hear stilted but still perfectly comprehensible German, and his expression immediately relaxed. “Of course, soldier.” And with nimble fingers, he snatched up a freshly fried sausage and slipped it into a paper wrapper, drizzling a dark sauce over it. It looked spicy and utterly delicious to the eye. “All right then—down the hatch with it, while it’s still hot!”

“Thanks.”

He relieved the old man of the sausage and reached for his wallet, but was stopped with, “On the house, today,” as the vendor waved him away.

The man’s expression grew solemn. “No no—I can’t possibly—” he started, opening his wallet again, but the old man just laughed.

“You’re one of the Japanese troops, right?” The man’s eyes widened a bit at this; it had been one thing to experience it in Berlin, but this was the first time anyone had guessed his nationality here. “I’m a devoted reader of Signal, y’see.”

“Signal? You mean the military affairs magazine?”

“Indeed. They had a piece in there about you Japanese boys.” Signal was a German magazine that, under the cooperation of several factions, ran a number of pieces on and displayed photos of top-of-the-line weaponry, with a fair few readers importing the magazine into Japan and other countries. “Consider it a sign of friendship between allies; my treat today,” he finished with a wink.

“Welcome to our faraway land, Soldier. How d’ya like Dresden so far?”

“Well, I haven’t been here long, but I must say it’s a fine city you’ve got here. I’ll be posted here for a while yet, so I’m sure I’ll have cause to drop by again. I thank you for your kindness—truly.”

Finding the altogether overly-Eastern gesture somewhat amusing, the old man returned, “You’re kind of stiff and stuffy, I’ll admit, but you’ve got quite the command of the German language. My bratty little grandsons could stand to learn a thing or two from you.”

“Thank you; I had to read quite a lot to attain even this level of proficiency, but I hope you’ll teach me some more casual phrases in the future. Well then—I’ll be taking my leave now.” He lifted the sausage and turned to leave—when the old man called out to his back.

“Hey—your name. What’s your name?”

The man turned, and after a beat, responded, “Daikaku.” He smiled. “Kokujouji Daikaku. First lieutenant in the Japanese armed forces.”

In the end, it seemed that despite turning the name over on his tongue a few times, the stall vendor was unable to remember the name ‘Kokujouji’. “Japanese names are tough! Mind if I call you ‘Dai’ instead?” he’d asked, chagrined, and Kokujouji had nodded with a wry grin.

“Of course; please use whichever name you find easiest to pronounce.”

Regardless, compatriots though they might have been at the moment, anyone who heard the rather grandiose name of ‘Kokujouji Daikaku’ tended to don an expression of confusion or bewilderment. It helped nothing that the name was

one that might have been appropriate for an aged man but was instead borne by a young greenhorn still in his 20s.

If you pressed the man himself for his opinion, he'd reluctantly admit that he was far from fond of it, but seeing as he was the current head of the Kokujouji family, he'd had little say in the matter. For generations, the head of the Kokujouji family, a name furtively roared amongst Japan's onmuyoudou sect, had introduced themselves as 'Daikaku.'

'Though I imagine if I make it another 50 years or so, though, I'll eventually wind up in a state befitting this name.'

His predecessor, the last man known as Daikaku, had indeed looked as if he deserved such a name.

'Suppose I'll have to get used to it.'

Pondering this, Kokujouji wandered along the river, eventually finding himself in the older parts of Dresden. The city was roughly divided into two parts: an old city, and a new one; and while the Old City seemed, on paper at least, to be the older of the two parts, the newer areas were the ones that had experienced an upswelling of growth and development.

There had been a great fire in the time of the Lord of Saxony, and the first to recover from the calamity had been the newer parts of the city. The narrow streets of the New City were lined with countless shops and restaurants, with bars and such crowded in amongst them—while the Old City boasted theaters and art museums and churches, all manner of cultural structures.

Kokujouji was heading for a small church in just that district at the moment. While the structure was referred to as an outbuilding of the most famous church in Dresden—the Frauenkirche—details beyond that were sketchy. But based on the architectural style, a number of researchers hypothesized that it had been erected in the same era as the Frauenkirche’s predecessor, the Kirche zu unser liuben Vrouwen,

Kokujouji had little experience with the Christian church, but still, standing before this building now, he felt an upswelling of piety rise unbidden from within. He’d made pilgrimages to Japan’s most famous temples and shrines a number of times, and here now, he felt much the same sense of respect for some great, fearsome presence as he did when he stepped onto temple grounds or into a temple sanctuary.

Without realizing it, he found himself executing a deep bow, removing his hat and placing his hand over his heart, holding the pose for a good five seconds. Passersby gave him strange glances, staring at the curious easterner.

‘Christianity is, for me, little more than a foreign religion. However, there is no “east” or “west”—no Occident or Orient when it comes to worshipping God; I’ll be reverent as I enter.’

And with these words to himself, Kokujouji lifted his head and pressed upon the great oaken doors to make his way inside.

“You were a bit later than I expected, Lieutenant—umm...Koku...shumittoji?” a rather clever-looking man in silver-rimmed glasses commented, reviewing the documents in his hand.

“My apologies. I was having a look about the city.” They were sitting in a room of the church that had been requisitioned as an office, and in addition to the man, several other researches in lab coats sat poring over materials on their own desks.

“Oh?” The man looked up and cocked his head curiously. “Whatever for?”

“...Well, I’ll be staying here for the foreseeable future. I thought it worthwhile to get a feel for the lay of the land.”

“Is that something peculiar to people of the Orient?”

“Not at all.” Kokujouji’s eyes crinkled slightly in mirth. “It was my own decision.”

The man in the glasses snorted derisively. “Rather sentimental, wouldn’t you say? At the very least, we try not to get too involved with the rational spirit of the German natives here. Do you know why?”

“No.” He had his suspicions, based on the man’s argument, but he still shook his head from side to side, and the man responded, tone steeped in pride:

“Your mission here is to analyze that from the perspective of Oriental softer sciences, such as divination studies and astrology. Further, you are to avoid mixing with the townsfolk or involving yourself in any way with the affairs of Dresden. You should have come straight here at the earliest possible opportunity.”

“.....” Kokujouji was dumbfounded, eventually managing, “...My deepest apologies,” as he politely ducked his head into a bow. He’d only been ordered to

report to this church some time today, with no established time demanded of him. He could think of no reason for this man, a mere researcher, to require any measure of punctuality from him. But he reasoned that this man's sour attitude was likely little more than the greatest resistance he could throw up as a man of science against those who dared to bring any manner of unscientific logic into this scientific facility. After a moment's consideration, he spoke with an overly serious expression, "But I did make a number of interesting discoveries, albeit rather of a personal nature. I found out that the sausages here are the tastiest in all of Germany."

For a moment, shock spread over the face of the man in the silver-rimmed glasses, but he quickly covered it with a soft snort, shrugging to himself. "What on earth are you talking about? We can't have you trying the sausage in this city alone and thinking you now know all sausage in Germany. Granted, the sausage in Dresden is fine, but it can't compare to the fare in my hometown. From the crispness of the casing as you bite into it to the faint sweetness of the meaty juices overflowing as you chew, it is indeed something!"

After a moment's exultation, the man seemed to snap back to his senses, clearing his throat and adding, "But well, enough about that. Let's get you up to speed on our research, shall we?" With that he leaped to his feet and started walking.

"...Yes, let's." Kokujouji allowed a faint smile to spread over his lips and followed the man, musing to himself, 'Guess everyone likes to boast about their homeland, no matter where they're from.'

When he'd learned that the grand project being carried out under the auspices of the upper echelons of the SS was being headed up by a pair of siblings still in their teens, Daikaku had been less surprised and more outright baffled—but after briefing himself on Claudia and Adolf's amazingly precocious genius, as well as their personal careers and achievements thus far, he instantly revised that line of thinking.

Their promising successes spanned all manner of fields, from military affairs to industry to academics. A quick perusal of their profiles further revealed that the pair had intellects far surpassing that of most people.

'So...these Germanic peoples appear to be a fantastic tribe indeed, given that they're churning out offspring with such amazing, borderline-supernatural talents.'

He also had to tip his hat to the flexible personnel direction of the ranking members of the SS who supported Claudia and Adolf, granting them free reign to oversee all aspects of the research.

'To demonstrate such rationality despite the problems facing them, they truly must be gifted to some extent. My homeland could stand to learn from them.'

Such thoughts filled in head. When he'd taken up the role as head of the Kokujouji family at a young age, he'd had to take a stand against a great many long-standing conventions and prejudices. Now, taking in these two prodigies, endowed with quick wits none could match, despite their youth, and entrusted with such great responsibility...Kokujouji found himself greatly intrigued.

Once they reached the base of the steps they were descending now, the man in the silver glasses turned down a long hallway that cut off to the side, continuing down until they reached a room at the very end—where he knocked on the door.

[CLAUDIA & ADOLF WEISMANN] read a nameplate on the door, and a cheerful, easygoing response came from within: "Come in, come in~! It's unlocked, so step right inside!"

The silver-rimmed glasses man answered back as he pushed his way inside, "Please excuse the intrusion—Sir, Ma'am. I've brought along Lieutenant Morgen."

"Morgen?" came a baffled voice. "Who the heck is that?" What followed was delivered in utterly flawless German. "You mean Lieutenant Kokujouji Daikaku, right? From Japan?" Kokujouji glanced slowly around the room, and there he saw—"Hey there! Welcome, Lieutenant."

A young man with silver hair sat atop a jumbled mess of a desk, and with his pale features and clear gray eyes, there was no way on earth he could ever have passed for a member of the Yamato race.

He casually extended a hand toward Kokujouji. Despite his impressive height, his smiling expression seemed to imbue this person—who sat firmly between "boy" and "man"—with a peculiar, pure innocence.

A bit thrown by the rather odd first impression of the young man, he reached out and gripped the hand extended towards him, in large part out of pure

conditioned reflex. And then—“...!!”

Cool and composed a man Kokujouji might have traditionally been, a rare expression of shock washed over his features—as Weismann’s arm fell clean off at the shoulder. Kokujouji stared at the fallen limb, eyes wide with shock, before immediately realizing that it was merely a celluloid fake.

The man in the silver-rimmed glasses shrugged, chagrined, at which point the young man doubled over in raucous laughter. “Ahahaha! Man, I got you good! Sorry ‘bout that!” His real arm now peeked out from inside his coat. It seemed he’d kept that arm hidden while extending the dummy hand instead. In his fingers, he held a red flower, and after offering it to Kokujouji, the young man winked mischievously.

“Just a little token of welcome! I’ll be counting on your help from here on out, Lieutenant.”

And that was how he met Adolf K. Weismann, the person with whom he would subsequently forge an irreplaceable bond.

It had been 3 years prior, in 1941, when someone from the SS’s Ahnenerbe Society had entered this small church. Church staff over the years had told tales of a holy relic transported from Bohemia hidden away in the bowels of the church, but none had ever stepped forward to investigate the veracity of such claims in detail.

Given its close connection with the church’s founding, this relic was never allowed to see the light of day, and for ages, it lay cloistered away behind an

inner wall underneath the church. However, rumors began to surface that—while admittedly confined to a rather narrow area—pilgrims who drew near to the relic had been treated to miracles, and as these tales reached the ears of the Ahnenerbe Society, they immediately made plans for the relic’s requisition and retrieval.

Under the pretense of demonstrating the superiority of the Aryan race, they were able to go to great lengths to obtain what they wanted on mere hearsay. However, while the excavation attempt was started quickly enough, the artifact that would come to be known as the “Dresden Slate” proved far too large to remove from the church, and after a quick photoshoot for preservation purposes, the object was left as it was for some two-and-a-half years.

That all changed, however, after guards witnessed what happened to several flies in an incident that would later be termed the “Procession of St. John.” These flies, despite not having any source of light within them, began to give off a brilliant light and formed a vague line as they flew together in the sky—before combusting into flame of their own making and dying.

Reports of these happenings reached the ears of SS members countrywide, who’d long been seeking some sort of miracle to refute notions of their motherland’s inferiority, and they immediately launched efforts to raise a huge amount of capital and human resources to further investigate the slate.

While the underground space had originally been an open area intended for the faithful to wander about without need of a lamp and offer worship before the holy relic, a mere two months after the “Procession of St. John”, it was

utterly transformed into a research facility fit to bursting with cutting-edge technologies and the greatest minds available.

The involvement of Claudia and Adolf Weismann as well—heralded as the double-headed geniuses of the Third Reich’s science divisions—was also determined as part of these efforts. While some had maintained that such high-caliber resources were better pressed into service on more compelling matters, the upper echelons of the SS demanded their efforts be concentrated on the slate.

That alone should have been evidence enough of just how great their belief was that they had indeed uncovered something truly miraculous. But despite starting their research efforts with a flourish, both Adolf and Claudia had encountered quite a few difficulties right off the bat.

After all, they were attempting to analyze something truly unique, something that had never been seen before. In the end, they’d wound up concentrating their efforts for a while on the preparation of a lab area outfitted with all manner of instruments and equipment and the examination and restoration of the stone fragments excavated from the same wall as the slate. Their superiors, however, battling concern over the fact that the pair hadn’t immediately produced clear results, hadn’t missed an opportunity to criticize them by choosing to invite a specialist from an ally country who might adopt a completely different approach from the scientific one attempted thus far.

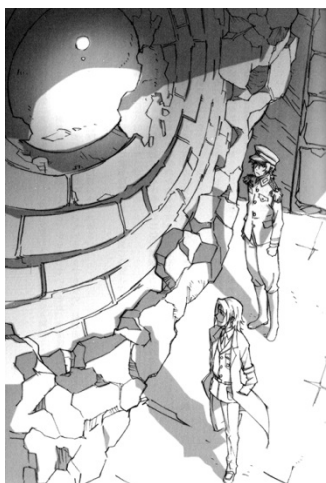
And that was how Kokujouji Daikaku came to Germany.

When, at Weismann’s guidance, he stood before the pedestal on which the

slate was resting, Kokujouji found himself enveloped in a strange wave of deep emotion.

It was a huge, circular stone sculpture—most definitely not natural—but no further thoughts really leapt to mind. He felt no reverence, no wonder; Kokujouji recalled feeling far more moved when he'd had chance to visit the Colosseum on a recent trip to Italy.

'I can sense a faint stirring—a quickening—but...it feels like its true form has yet to manifest here...' he reflected, seeking out some sense of the slate's presence. 'Is this only its husk...or is it merely sleeping...?'



"So?? Figured out something already?" Weismann asked curiously. It didn't feel like teasing or making fun, but it also didn't sound entirely like he really expected anything either, his light tone suggesting he was nothing more than the aimless flake of a man he'd seemed on first sight.

Kokujouji shook his head, quietly admitting, "...No, not particularly."

"...I see." Weismann didn't probe any further. "Well, I've got some business to attend to, so I'm gonna step out for a few. I've already made sure everyone knows about you, so feel free to wander about as you please. We can do dinner

later—let me hear all about Japan!”

He wrapped up the conversation in a one-sided flurry of German, leaving Kokujouji to marvel to himself, 'He really is a strange man...' He was, without a doubt, not like most people. He watched Weismann practically dance over beyond the pillars, disappearing into the shadows, before he turned to face the slate once more.

Lamps set on either side of the slate illuminated it clearly, and several instruments placed before it were constantly measuring data and spitting out records of the findings. Kokujouji casually sauntered over to the equipment, when—“!!”

All of the lamps suddenly flared red, and a warning buzzer began to sound. Brows furrowed in helpless confusion, Kokujouji glanced around. Had he done something wrong?

He was just thinking of flagging down someone familiar with the instruments, though, when Weismann poked his head out from around the pillar. “Hahahah! Man, I totally got you again!” he laughed, expression akin to that of a child. He gripped something that looked like a remote control in his hand, and at the press of a button on the device, all of the flashing and beeping ceased. It seemed he'd prepared the entire equipment setup just to spook Kokujouji. “Y’know, you’ve usually got kind of a serious expression, but you sure do look funny when you’re surprised!” he confessed, shoulders shaking in mirth, and flitted off again.

Kokujouji watched him leave, muttering, “Good grief...this certainly doesn’t

bode well for the future...” It certainly didn’t, indeed.

Some two weeks had passed since then, and while he’d come all the way to Dresden in the interests of studying the Slate from an Eastern divination perspective, the vague sense of unease he’d felt from the moment he met Weismann seemed to be well-founded.

For starters, he was at a loss as to how to even approach the Slate in the first place. The hollow atmosphere he’d sensed about the item on initial review hadn’t changed in the least. If he had to describe it, he’d place it as something like dropping a lure and waiting endlessly for a bite in a pond void of any fish. No matter how experienced the fisherman, without any potential prey flitting about, his skills were useless. The Slate possessed an unnatural forcedness, an artificiality, like puddles of water left behind after a storm in the night.

‘So how exactly am I to go about picking this thing apart...?’

Kokujouji’s lineage had survived for centuries hiding in the darkness of Japan’s underbelly as great onmyouji—exorcists. Under the auspices of the Grand Council during the Meiji Restoration, they’d been incorporated into the Astronomy Division and subsequently been formally instated as supernatural safeguards of the state.

Some might argue that they’d been swallowed up actually, while others maintained that they’d merely wormed their way into the government’s good graces. This was why Kokujouji Daikaku now wore two masks: that of a military lieutenant, and that of the head of the Kokujouji Clan, guarding against magical influences affecting the country of Japan.

And those mysterious secret techniques, passed down through generations for a thousand years, lived on yet within the young head of the Kokujouji Clan. However, he was now faced with an artifact which likely differed completely from anything his ancestors had ever laid eyes on before.

Frankly, Kokujouji currently felt nothing more than the thrall of great bafflement. To make matters worse, another matter further hindering the job he'd been hired to carry out was the complete and utter lack of cooperation from the researchers working here in the church. Every day, Kokujouji would arrive on site, and in addition to his usual act of observing the Slate, he'd make a point of reading some of the old texts from the church or skimming over the data gathered thus far.

However, given that he'd been an outsider to the project before coming here, there were occasionally points he didn't quite grasp in his readings, leaving him with little choice but to consult some of the lab techs around him. But inevitably, whenever he found himself in need of advice, he would only be greeted with cool indifference or a reaction suggesting they hadn't heard him. Even on the rare occasions when he was able to ply the researchers for aid, their responses would always be accompanied by heavy sighs or tutting of the tongues. Suffice it to say, rare were the times when he was able to get his work done in an orderly fashion.

Kokujouji was hardly the sort to be easily offended, but it was vexing indeed to have progress delayed, and he was reminded once again that societies the world over all tended to scorn the less-respected methods of study.

But he was not without his support—in fact, there was one single person who treated him without prejudice, interacting brightly, amicably, and kindly with him—the impromptu leader of the research lab, one of the genius twins of the Third Reich: Adolf K. Weismann.

In fact, the man had seemed to view Kokujouji affectionately from the moment they'd met. Any concerns Kokujouji may have had were instantly greeted with an explanation, and if he seemed troubled by anything, he would take time out of his own day to quickly and cleanly see the issue resolved.

Truthfully, without Weismann, Kokujouji would've found himself tripped up by the barrier of human interaction and likely sent back to his homeland after being unable to produce any results of worth. In that sense, he was grateful to Weismann.

And this gratitude extended beyond their working relationship: Weismann seemed to enjoy spending his private hours together with Kokujouji as well. If their schedules worked out, he would share his lunch with Kokujouji, even inviting the lieutenant to the private quarters he'd taken in the church, where they would knock back a beer together.

Weismann was a genius not just in matters of the mind but in ensuring people never got bored around him, placing great value on topics of conversation. The stories which spilled from his encyclopedic memory never failed to impress—touching on everything from the latest advances in physics to Greek tragedies to issues with colonial rule in Southeast Asia, even the latest in popular fashion. He would flit from topic to topic, shifting from his thoughts on experiments in the

field of psychology to idle gossip about ranking officers, but no matter the topic, his precise sourcing and knack for insight led him to draw conclusions no layman would, and oftentimes even the iron-miened Kokujouji found himself with a secret smile forming on his lips.

Weismann was good at that sort of thing, and most of the conversations they shared together involved Kokujouji merely offering an ear to listen—though when the topic turned to matters involving Japan, he took the reins. Weismann wanted to know all about Japan, even the tiniest details—about its culture and customs, its geography and history, and his eyes would always glint happily with interest as Kokujouji regaled him with the full extent of his knowledge.

“Wow, that sounds really nice... I’d like to travel to Japan someday! That country of mysteries, where people come together. It sounds amazing...” he would lament with an enchanted sigh.

To an unbiased observer, though, Weismann’s knowledge of Japan was exceeding unbalanced. After delivering a disturbingly sharp depiction of wooden architecture and Japanese political affairs, he would continue with a serious mien: “And the Japanese military institution is made up primarily of samurai and ninjas, right? So are you a samurai? Or a ninja?” Followed by, “Can you clone yourself, Lieutenant? What about the Earth Release move?”

He didn’t seem to be teasing; given that he probably only had written material as his source of information, his ability to differentiate between fiction and nonfiction had apparently been shot. It was in aspects like these that one could clearly see how offset Weismann’s knowledge was.

An adult and a child.

A clever mind and innocent curiosity.

Just when you thought he was coming at you with a serious argument, he'd turn the situation into a silly prank, thrilled with himself. This man seemed to curiously have two sides to himself, Kokujouji realized rather early on.

'But given how trying he can be, I still find it easier interacting with the other researchers...'

He never said as such aloud, but this was how he felt about Weismann internally. While the others around demonstrated a clear hostility toward Kokujouji, they were at least easy to understand, but Weismann's extraordinary intelligence provided excellent camouflage, making his true motives exceedingly difficult to discern.

Indeed, even sharing a meal as they were, while they might seem to be conversing amicably, the truth of the matter was somewhat different.

'He has yet to truly open himself up to me... Just like the Slate,' he thought to himself, letting Weismann's lighthearted chatting flit in one ear and out the other. From the moment he'd set foot in this country, he'd resolved to surpass any and all obstacles by sticking to two simple rules.

The first was to treat anyone with whom he interacted with the utmost respect. Just as he'd paid his respects to the church itself on that first day, he would endeavor to properly understand his partner's feelings and culture, dealing with them with the utmost sincerity.

And the second...was to penetrate himself—as a soldier who’d received the very best training around, as the head of an ancient onmyouji clan, and more than anything else, as the Japanese man Kokujouji Daikaku himself. He had faith that he would be able to do this.

In the face of numerous delays, that Sunday, a breakthrough was made in the form of the appearance of a young woman. Embarrassing as it was, he had no intention of ever admitting that this chance meeting between himself and the woman was, as he saw it, an incident that affected him both publicly and privately.

He’d been sitting in a corner of a cafe situated in an older part of town, reading a book he’d brought with him from Japan. The cafe served a delicious dark blend, and the moderate decorations lent the shop a comfortable feeling, so he’d been coming here for the past week or so, taking his lunch from one of the many kiosks that frequented the area.

He’d grown close with one particular shop owner, a man named Johann, and they liked to converse a bit whenever Kokujouji stopped by. On this day, after enjoying a sausage from Johann’s cart, he’d come to this cafe and been skimming the text he held.

And that was when it happened.

“...Please forgive me if I’m mistaken, but...would you happen to be Lieutenant Kokujouji of the Japanese military?” a voice called out in soft German, and when Kokujouji looked up from his book, his eyes widened a hair as he was met with a strikingly beautiful woman standing before him.

Her silver hair gleamed, shading bright gray eyes, and her slender frame was enveloped in an elegant air. Kokujouji knew how to take in a person's looks, to appreciate aesthetics, but he'd never seen so beautiful a woman, with an aura radiating from within like this, in Japan or Germany.

"...Yes. That would be me," he responded, a bit shyly, and her eyes widened.

"Oh, marvelous! I wasn't sure what I'd do if I'd been wrong!" She smiled merrily here, placing her hand on her chest with an air of relief which made her seem all the more like a cute young woman.

By now, though, Kokujouji had managed to wrap his mind around the situation, and it was his turn to question her as he stood and extended a hand in greeting. "I take it you must be Claudia-san, then? Adolf's elder sister."

"I see your powers of deduction are quite admirable, Lieutenant."

"It was quite easy to tell; you very much resemble him." It was hard to imagine that there were many people running around Dresden who carried themselves with such an air of superiority. If there were, it could only be the other half of the pair of genius twins. The woman—Claudia Weismann—shook Kokujouji's hand happily, gracing him with a bright smile.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant. I've finally managed to make your acquaintance." It seemed they'd just missed meeting each other on his arrival, as Claudia had been away from the research site in Berlin for the past two weeks.

The sensation of her slim, pale fingers brushing against his own stayed with Kokujouji for some time after.

At Kokujouji's invitation, Klaudia shared the table with him taking the seat opposite his. She was here at the café to enjoy the short break. In fact, she had been a regular of the café before Kokujouji.

“I'll take up your offer, excuse me for bothering you.”

Klaudia greeted politely, as she sat down gracefully after that.

She ordered Cinnamon tea from the staff who was approaching her before turning her attention back to Kokujouji.

“So, what do you think of Dresden? Are you more or less settled in?”

Her voice was gentle and moving. Kokujouji gave a small smile and replied.

“Yes I did thanks to you.”

“I'm sorry that I'm only able to come and greet you earlier as I was unable to straighten out the issue at Berlin until now.”

“What happened?”

“No, it's nothing much. Just that, I'm handing over all sorts of research Addy... Adolf and I did in the past, this took me some time.”

“I see.”

“Now, Adolf and I can finally focus on our research on the “slate”. “

“ ... ”

Kokujouji glanced at Klaudia looking somewhat surprised. It seemed that it was not just due to the order from the above. Weismann and Klaudia both put their heart into the research on the “Slate”. In order to fully focus on the

research, as the sister, she had to go back and sort out other work. Just from this alone, he could see that the two geniuses are really into it.

(Seems that the “Slate” is authentic.)

Kokujouji thought, squinting his eyes while sipping his coffee.

“Lieutenant?”

Klaudia asked observing Kokujouji’s expression.

“I’m sorry to be bothering you when you are relaxing on your off day and to ask such question... but if you don’t mind, please tell me about that “Slate”...”

The way her eyes shone far surpassing the light of intellect.

“What is your opinion?”

“ ... ”

Kokujouji adopted a cautious attitude.

“This...”

She was sorting out her line of thought as she answered...

“To be honest, I don’t have a clue yet.”

He paused for a moment before continuing.

“But because things I don’t understand keep accumulating, that led me to think that maybe I could have found a clue.”

Klaudia listened to him attentively. She was interested in the words he used.

Kokujouji’s gaze fell on the table.

“It’s was a last minute cramming when I take up this mission, however I have read up once on Christianity, Kabbalah, Astrology, Numerology and other western occults. And now, when I used my own way to investigate on that “slate”, from the conclusion, I still feel that that “Slate” contains some kind of non-western key system. Most importantly...”

He forced a smile gently as he continued...

“If it isn’t because of this, there is no reason for me to be here. I just want to confirm this myself. In a sense, these two weeks had not been a waste.”

“Lieutenant, you...”

Klaudia spoke up slowly.

“You’re really honest and sincere towards your job.”

“Because this is my mission.”

He replied somewhat coldly.

“Next, I will use every means, to use all the techniques and knowledge I’m good at on the research of the “Slate”. The real work starts now. Even though this is just my hunch, I just feel that the western theory or the eastern spell will not do. That thing is beyond all these. “

A key word popped up in Kokujouji’s mind suddenly.

““Harmony” for not losing oneself and “fit” for fitting in here (somewhere foreign).”

Even though it was vague but he seemed to have a clue.

“Lieutenant?”

Kokujouji returned back to the reality upon hearing Klaudia’s voice.

“I’m sorry. I’m thinking about something.”

“It’s okay.”

As she looked at him with a gentle smile, he decided to tell Klaudia all these.

“Fräulein (German: Miss). Initially, I was unable to sense anything from that “Slate”. That seems to be something shallow that appeared after the heavy rain. This is just what I feel extremely superficially. However, I feel that if we can break through the surface, there is something more waiting for us. Regarding this...”

He hesitated a little, but decided to finish his words.

“I have a very strong hunch.”

Klaudia remained silent for a little before breaking into a lighthearted laugh as she spoke up...

“... this is too much a coincidence.”

She looked at Kokujouji under her long eyelashes.

“My brother and I have exactly the same idea in mind.”

Klaudia is so beautiful. Kokujouji had this feeling again.

After that, the two of them did not speak for a while. Kokujouji was a man with few words, so it was not so hard for him to remain silent. Klaudia’s face flushed a little as she spoke up...

“By the way, Lieutenant, you were just saying earlier that you are reading. What kind of books are you reading?”

Her gaze fell on the book Kokujouji left on the table in order to change the subject.

“This book?”

Kokujouji remained indifferent as he picked the book.

“These are the collection of Heinrich Heine’s poems.”

“Heinrich Heine?”

Klaudia looked surprised.

“But, isn’t this a Japanese book?”

“Fräulein, there is no barrier between good works. Of course, they have to be had properly translated and published by the Japanese. Personally, I feel that this poet had the spirit of this country. I have the German version of the book as well. I just feel like reading it in Japanese today.”

Klaudia looked even more surprised.

“So, so to say, lieutenant likes poem?”

Kokujouji replied in a completely different tone, different from the tone he used at work...

“Yes. At least, I would say I don’t dislike it.”

Klaudia’s apricot eyes were staring wide while Kokujouji maintained his poker face.

“Oh yes, speaking of eastern and western. I have this book. It’s the literary work, Japanese Haiku which was translated into German. To be specific, it was a research book on Haiku written in English by an imagist poet and it was translated into German... Do you like to read?”

Kokujouji took out a book from his bag as he talked. It was a book titled “Japanese Free Verse” printed in German on the cover. Klaudia took the book from him.

“Ha ha.”

She started to laugh as she seemed to be reminded of something funny.

“Is there anything wrong?”

Kokujouji asked in confusion. Klaudia replied while covering her mouth.

“I’m sorry. I have the impression that lieutenant is a scary man.”

After that, she gave him a teasing look...

“I didn’t think you have interest such an area.”

Kokujouji forced out a laugh.

“People always say that about me. I’m not self-conscious enough to notice, but I must have looked intimidating.”

Klaudia couldn’t stop giggling...

“It’s because you’re a soldier. Isn’t it better to look a little more intimidating?”

Kokujouji’s stiffened body started to relax upon hearing that. A sudden inspiration came into his mind like it did earlier.

(Be myself, treat people with courtesy)

That was right.

He seemed to have found a focus point. Not just for the “Slate”, it would be effective against those people he wanted to become close to.

For example, a cheerful genius who loves to play pranks yet doesn’t open up to people easily.

“Miss Klaudia.”

Kokujouji said to the lady sitting opposite of him...

“I need a little favour from you, but not sure if it is convenient for you?”

A plan was completed in his mind.

Nothing special happened for the next two weeks, time flew by steadily. Adolf K. Weismann was collecting the basic data of the “Slate” passionately as usual. While working on his job earnestly, he could find a breakthrough on any challenging project, this was his unwavering belief. Whoever that neglect the basic of the research is not likely to be favored by knowledge of God.

Fortunately, his research partner sister had returned from Berlin, their work could progress smoothly.

They should see some progress for their research in a month time.

Just when Weismann was able to relax as he began looked around him; he noticed some change in his research institute.

At first glance, no one else other than Weismann who was sensitive to the

feelings of the others could perceive that Kokujouji was the one who brought these changes.

The relationship among the people in the institute had improved as compared to before. After carefully observing his behavior, he understood a few things. First of all, although it was not everyone, many people in the institute had exchange greeting and chit-chat with Kokujouji in daily life.

Kokujouji had not done anything special. He was only greeting others very politely. He speaks to people sincerely. As long as it was reasonable, he would share his view while keeping his etiquette in check.

He was just repeating these indifferent behaviours.

But these behaviours gained him the trust of the temperamental researchers little by little.

“Yo, look at his face of a predatory fish with a metal mask; I can’t believe he could win over people. Lieutenant, he was really worthy as a soldier... No, he must be a natural born leader.”

Weismann was aware that this was easier said than done. As someone from a foreign land like Kokujouji, it would be easily noticed if he was not sincere.

“He is good.”

His sister, Klaudia had been backing Kokujouji up actively, this really caught Weismann by surprise.

As this was a patriarchal country, Weismann served as the Director of Research in name. In fact, whether it was by performance or by talent, Klaudia

was way better than him.

Because of that, the researchers were in awe of Klaudia. To think Kokujouji was able to talk and laugh with the young and pretty superior like her.

In the others' eyes, they were able to emulate him. This was a huge factor of how Kokujouji was able to blend in with the people in the institute.

“My sister is never able to communicate with strangers like I can and she isn't the type who will open up to a man easily.”

In actual fact, Weismann was somewhat jealous at what was going on before him. He did not hate him definitely, but if he was to get too close to his dearest sister, he would still be a little jealous. Hence, Weismann thought of...

“Oh yeah, I haven't been playing a prank on him for a while. Why don't I think of some trick?”

Ever since his sister returned, for some time, Weismann who had been a good boy was planning for something for Kokujouji once more.

For a genius like him, Weismann's plan was really childish as it was no different from a prank by middle schooler. Today, he thought of using a stray cat which had been found trespassing the institute recently.

It was a fat cat with a long face which doesn't care about people.

Weismann gave it a name on his own calling it “Tamagoro”. The cat appeared in the institute about the same time with Kokujouji. Hence he decided to use a cat with a Japanese-like name. Weismann planned to put the cat in a bag, and trick Kokujouji to put his hand into the bag. His aim was to see him in shock. It

was not a noteworthy trap actually.

However, Tamagoro was not a cat which would do Weismann's bidding that easily. It wriggled in resistance; finally it managed to scratch Weismann's hand and escaped.

"Ouch!"

Weismann yelped while running after the cat.

"Wait for me, stupid cat! I'll take you to Japan next time!"

This offer presumably did not appeal to the cat. It trotted away quickly. Weismann ran after it with a fun mentality, but he bumped directly against somebody at the corner of the hallway.

"Ah!"

Something loud was heard breaking on the ground, accompanying was a scream by someone he did not know who.

"Ouch! I'm sorry!"

Weismann who was seeing stars for a moment, could recognize he was Kokujouji he knocked into right away. Fragments of broken ceramic vase were scattered all over on the ground at his feet. At the same time, Weismann's sister, Klaudia covered her mouth to stop her scream from escaping, her eyes was looking at his direction.

It seemed that he had knocked into Kokujouji who had been walking side-by-side with Klaudia.

The person who was holding on to the ceramic vase is Kokujouji?

“Lieutenant! Sorry sorry!”

Weismann imitated the Japanese seeking for forgiveness by clapping his hands together to right before his eyes.

Until then, even though he was very sorry, but he did not realise how serious the situation was.

He did not expect...

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Looking at Kokujouji and Klaudia’s expression, there was obviously a problem. First of all, Klaudia looked pale.

She had a tragic expression Weismann had never seen before on her face as she gazed at him, and she shook her head silently.

Was it his imagination? There was tear in her eyes.

Weismann felt his heartbeat started to speed up.

“Eh? What’s going on? Why does it seem very bad?”

On the other hand, Kokujouji was looking expressionless as usual. He gazed at the broken fragments intently as a layer of despair surfaced on his face.

“Ah, it broke.”

“E-excuse me... Lieutenant?”

“It can’t be helped. Looks like I have to perform seppuku.”

“Hey?”

That unpleasant word caused Weismann’s eyes to widen. Kokujouji pulled out a knife at his waist, and gazed at the blade frequently.

“Wait, eh? Hey?”

Klaudia shouted aloud at Weismann who was frantic.

“Addy! That vase was specially given to Lieutenant by the Japanese General. It’s an one and only treasure in the world!”

Kokujouji stopped Klaudia gently but that did not stop her from continuing her words.

“It was me who bugged him to show me, so he took it out, you...”

This time, tears really gushed out Klaudia’s eyes.

“What have you done?”

Weismann panicked.

“Eh? No way? You are kidding me right?”

“I’m sorry, Weismann.”

Kokujouji smiled at him.

“I can no longer help you in your research, please inform my home country on my behalf.”

“Why is it so?” Just because of this... Why?”

“You asked me the other time if I’m a ninja or a samurai? Now I can tell you I’m a samurai. So I have commit seppuku as apology.”

“Seppuku?”

A chill crawled up his spine.

Adolf Weismann did know about this. When a samurai had committed an irrevocable failure, in order to uphold his honour, they would choose to commit suicide.

“No!”

He could stop himself from shouting.

“Don’t, Lieutenant!”

It was too late. Kokujouji flipped the blade towards his stomach and stabbed himself.

“I”

Weismann wailed for nothing. Just when he thought Kokujouji was going to collapse slowly...

“Weismann.”

The face with resolute grim expression, revealed a faint smile.

“Managed to scare you?”

Kokujouji gently pulled out the blade and its tip turned into a bouquet of flowers.

“Please also guide me along from now on. These flowers are a token of my gratitude, please accept it.”

Taking a closer look, he did not know when Klaudia had stopped her tears, and was giggling earnestly. Weismann was surprised from ear-to-ear.

“Lieutenant? That man who does thing by the book actually made a fool of me?”

Kokujouji said seriously...

“Sun Tzu said this, “All warfare is based on deception”. Strategy planning was originally a military duty.”

Suddenly, Weismann was enlightened.

“I see! Lieutenant is in line with me!”

In order to response to his prank, he planned something he was not good at. This was an expression someone of a serious nature came up with, with his own way of thinking.

He meant he was willing to try his best to play along with him.

His mouth curved into a smile naturally. Very quickly, that smile burst into laughter. At this moment, Weismann was really happy, very very happy.

For the first time ever in his life, he found himself a friend who was willing to play with him. Klaudia who was standing at the side had a reassuring smile on her face.

Kokujouji was also smiling.

“Lieutenant!”

Weismann extended his hand subconsciously for a handshake.

“I’m actually the one who needs you to guide me along!”

Kokujouji accepted his handshake and said...

“Weismann, on the analysis of the “Slate”, I have a proposal I hope you will listen...”

That proposal came with a new perspective which would provide breakthrough in activating the “Slate” successfully in future.

At that point in time, Kokujouji, Adolf and Klaudia did not know yet, what kind of destiny was awaiting each of them.

Epilogue: To A New Journey

The room was a lot quiet when Isana Yashiro woke up again.

“Ah well.”

Yashiro remained on the bed. Raising his hand towards the ceiling, he felt that, he had a nostalgic dream.

“Erm...”

In his dream, there was a woman whose mere presence gave him peace.

And a man who could chat with him heartily with of the future.

Over there, Yashiro had everything he could ask for, he was very happy.

That was just a dream.

“Ok...”

Why was it so?

Tears suddenly welled up his eyes. No matter how hard Yashiro tried to think, trying to focus to get to the bottom of his memory, he could not find the reason why. In his dream, he was actually happy, but when he woke up, what was left was bitterness from grief.

He could not remember.

But, he knew it was something important he had to face one day.

It was something important he seemed to have lost completely.

“Just... what kind of person am I?”

Getting tired of thinking, he shut his eyes tightly. As a result, the surrounding area of his temple started to hurt, and he felt nauseous.

“It hurts...”

Yashiro clutched his head as he tried to sit up. Feeling of uneasiness bubbled up, leading his pulse to race. His current mental condition could not be considered as pleasant.

And then...

He realized.

The room was in a mess.

“ ... ”

Yashiro’s eyes widened and he was tongue-tied as he scanned the surrounding.

The painting on the wall fell off, the towels were scattered everywhere, the whole television was knocked down on the floor, and the lighting on the ceiling were broken into pieces.

This place practically just went through a stormy ritual.

“Er...”

In a puzzled expression, Yashiro looked around again.

“Well, wow!”

He finally found Kuroh and Neko, and he could not stop himself from crying

out. The two of them were sitting back to back in the corner of the room in fatigue.

And both of them were glaring at him with ferocious eyes.

“...”

“...”

They seemed to have something to say judging from their eyes. Kuroh looked a lot haggard, there were red scratches over his face, a few buttons of his white blouse had fallen off, and he was panting in pain. Neko could not catch her breath either. Her hair was standing up as though she was electrocuted. She was wearing a skirt she picked up during their run on her bottom half, while wearing Kuroh's coat on her top half, without buttoning it.

“...”

Yashiro stared at them for quite a while, then he raise his finger and ask.

“Have you...”

Tilting his head.

“Have you become good friends already?”

“No way!”

“Impossible!”

Kuroh and Neko stood up and denied in unison. After that, they faced each other and started to quarrel again.

“This girl who has no sense of shame, I forbid you from ever stripping before

me again from now on!”

“Say who Kurosuke! If you dare to bother me and Shiro again, I will have you suffer a lot more badly than this time!”

Kuroh and Neko glared at each other in fury. Their distance was so close that their heads were going to touch each other.

“Shameless girl!”

“Dull and boring pervert!”

“What did you say?”

“You want to fight?”

Well... the two of them tussled with both their hands and legs together. Although they seemed to be pissed off by one another, they seemed to be moving in unison.

“Pfff!”

Yashiro laughed suddenly.

He felt as if he found a release from the tension he had in his mind. Should he say he felt at peace with her around or rather she was always causing commotion.

As for the other man, to chat with him heartily about their future will get him a simple declaration of him wanting to kill him.

They were completely different from the pair in his dream.

It took a toll on him just hanging out with them.

But...

Despite that...

“Fu, fu hahaha!”

Yashiro’s shoulder trembled as he started laughing. And then...

“Ahahahahahahahahaha!”

He laughed out loud.

Yatogami Kuroh and Neko.

They were his companion in their fascinating journey. Seeing them in a fight allowed his uneasiness and the discomfort in his body he woke up with to vanish completely without a trace. The two of them were stunningly powerful; their hearts were way tougher than his.

“Kuroh, Neko.”

Most probably, both of them carried scars from their pasts. They were lost countless times and they had been moving forward despite being in pain.

From their clear eyes and their straightforward actions, he could sense that their personalities were drilled in the name of time and the result of their determination and choices.

They were definitely not born with it by stroke of good luck.

Only through repetitive hardship and overcoming difficulties, they became who they were today.

He did not know why, Yashiro was sure of that.

“Maybe I’m also... if only this is so. Or at least hopefully I’m like that from now on.”

Yashiro smiled as he walked up to Kuroh and Neko who were confused. He locked both his arms around their necks and hugged them tightly.

“You... what are you doing?!”

Kuroh blushed a little and he was flustered. He did not throw him off as he felt that Yashiro was giving off an aura different from the usual. On the other hand, Neko simply accepted his hug.

“Shiro!”

Neko nuzzled her face against his with an expression of “Shiro is finally willing to get close to me.”

“... Please hear me out, both of you.”

Yashiro remained in this position as he made his declaration. Kuroh and Neko stopped moving, waiting for Yashiro’s next words. Yashiro said in a calm voice...

“I still don’t know who I’m. As I don’t have the memories of the past, I don’t have the experience of having actually lived. To be honest... “

He paused for a moment.

“Maybe I’m really a murderer.”

Kuroh’s shoulder stiffened. But, other than that he had no other reaction. A small smile appeared at the corner of Yashiro’s mouth.

“Perhaps, as Kuroh said, I may be the evil Seventh King. For the sake of this world, the people, I’m an existence to be erased.”

At this moment, Neko who had been quiet suddenly wailed...

“No way!”

With a little anger in her tone, she said firmly.

“Shiro is Shiro! Shiro’s mine... You’re our Shiro!”

Kuroh seemed a little surprised.

“ ... ”

Very quickly, a smile broke out across Yashiro’s face.

“Yes, you’re right. Whatever you said must be right, Neko.”

“Hey yeah.” Neko looked happy. Yashiro patted her head. With a gentle gaze, he continued to talk.

“Neko is right. But, even so, I still want to be Isana Yashiro, making the choice to live with my own will. Therefore, even if I encounter any obstacle and difficulty, I still want to live on as Isana Yashiro.”

“But, you may be guilty, and I may have to fulfill Ichigen-sama’s will.”

Yashiro continued in response.

“Even so, I still don’t want to carry the sin of the Seventh King I have no memory of, with no resonance, and nothing to do with. Even if I’m guilty, I hope to carry the sin as Isana Yashiro. Not as somebody else, but as Isana Yashiro.”

He glanced at him with determined eyes.

“I hope you will kill me as my friend.”

“...”

Kuroh shook his head quietly, not saying anything.

Neko seemed to be really angry.

“Kuroh is a big idiot! I’ll definitely protect Shiro if the time comes! I’ll definitely show my naked body to you many more times!”

“Thank you, Neko... Eh? Naked?”

Yashiro paused tilting his head as he could not comprehend the words. In contrary, Neko said proudly.

“Because, Shiro is Neko’s Shiro! Shiro is my Shiro!”

“Make sense.”

Yashiro had given up on the topic of being naked. He took Kuroh and Neko into a hug tightly once again.

“I’m Neko’s Shiro, and also Kuroh’s friend, Isana Yashiro. I will work hard so I can say this with my head held high.”

After that, he moved away gently.

He took a glance at Kuroh and Neko one by one with a smile.

“So, I have a favour to ask of you.”

At this time, all the sudden, a ringtone sounding like an incoming message

alert was heard. Yashiro and Kuroh stared at Neko in surprise while Neko was confused.

“Meow?”

She tilted her head, took out a PDA from the pocket of Kuroh’s coat she had been wearing. Neko planned to play with it.

Kuroh became anxious.

“Hey, what are you doing? That’s mine!”.

Kuroh hastily snatched the phone from Neko and worked on it. Scanning down the screen quickly with his eyes and his face suddenly paled.

“Something like this actually happened?”

“What happened?”

Kuroh obviously looked surprised and puzzled, so Yashiro could not help but to ask.

Kuroh glanced at him and turned his eyes back to his PDA before turning his attention back to Yashiro, he hesitated for a moment as he spoke up.

“The information broker I know and sent me some news.”

“Information broker? You actually have dealing with such people?”

Kuroh did not know if he should be mad at Yashiro who looked surprised. He said.

“In order to find you... in order to find the evil Seventh King, I asked several people for help.”

“I see.”

Yashiro gave a forced laugh. Kuroh added, “Nevermind that.”

“The “Red King” Suoh Mikoto who had been held captive under the Blue Clan, Scepter 4 seemed to have led his clansmen and had taken over the school island.”

Taking a deep breath, he continued,

“The access to the school island had been completely cut off. The situation had escalated such that the Blue King, Munakata Reisi had personally led Scepter 4 into taking action - Perhaps this will lead to full-scale war.”

His face looked extremely tensed.

At this point in time, Neko suddenly shouted, “Kukuri!”

Yashiro and Kuroh also thought of the same thing.

“Kukuri should still be there, Shiro!”

Neko grabbed Yashiro by his collar. Yashiro shut his eyes tight. Kuroh asked.

“What should we do?”

“Shiro!”

Isana Yashiro opened his eyes. His face wore its usual smile.

“Seems that a war is brewing.”

He said with a nonchalant tone.

The tone came from the cheerful Isana Yashiro with an attitude that allowed

him to blend in anywhere.

“Anyway, what I want to propose is this.”

Yashiro laughed lightly.

“I want to return to the school island, because it is necessary to re-investigate a lot of things - but never did I expect the situation to turn out this way.”

“So...”

Neko looked at Yashiro with her sparkling eyes.

Wherever Yashiro wanted to go, she would not hesitate to keep up. This was something she finally found after becoming a cat; she finally found peace for the very first time.

“ ... ”

Kuroh sighed with exasperation.

“You’re up against the “Red King” and the “Blue King” and you alone are of no match against them. Let’s not talk about the “Blue King”, the “Red King” really want to take your life.”

He looked at Yashiro.

“Before I get to see your true colours, how can I let you be killed by someone else? I’ll be letting Ichigen-sama down.”

He said that really seriously.

Yashiro laughed.

In that stadium, there were many opportunities for Kuroh to abandon Yashiro. But he did not do that. Hence, he believed he will continue to keep his promise.

Staking on the honour of the late Ichigen.

And the “bond” he had chosen.

Yashiro looked at the two of them before him. He marveled at the thought of the fate that tied the three of them together.

With that cheerful and extremely frivolous tone, Isana Yashiro spelled out the keywords to their meetings.

“Let’s go. Let’s return to the school island!”

Side Story: On The Run

Wallpaper dominated by the color pink.

A bed shamelessly carved into the shape of two hearts. There's proof of some degree of cleaning, yet the interior decoration still radiated a sense of cheapness.

“Haah”

Isana Yashiro fell onto the bed bonelessly, unbuttoning the top of his shirt.

“-feels like I came a long way.”

It was his first time stepping into such a place.

A bring-along inn, if we're going for old-fashioned expressions.

Or, more bluntly put, a love hotel.

It's not like he didn't feel curious about the silver mirror ball on the ceiling, or the pop-colored fridge in the shape of a star, but Yashiro experienced a degree of fatigue that wouldn't even permit his usual curiosity.

“Shiro! Shiro!”

Right then, Neko stuck her head out of the bathroom.

“Are you sure you won't take a bath with me?”

It seems like she had wasted no time in getting rid of her clothes. At the moment, she looked exactly like when they first met - in other words, naked.

Yashiro replied, expending minimal effort to lift his head.

“Neko. What did you promise me just now?”

“Um....”

The hint of a pout appeared on Neko’s face.

“To not show myself naked in front of men!”

“Exactly. So please keep that up.”

Yashiro said with a tired smile before letting his head sink into the bedsheets again, accompanied by a soft ‘thud’ sound. Neko grumbled, “That’s boring! And here I wanted to have fun with Shiro and splash each other with water!”

She retracted her head. Yashiro felt quite awkward when she suddenly started to take off her clothes in front of him a while ago. It took a lot out of him to simply persuade an unwilling Neko to take a shower alone. He heard the tell-tale sounds of a showerhead and cheerful humming.

Neko had pale skin and curves in all right places, resulting in quite the attractive body.

It’s not like he wasn’t interested at all, as a guy.

(I’m pretty sure I’ve done myself quite a few disavors as a member of the male gender...) Yashiro smiled without humor and closed his eyes. What he really wanted to do was just fall asleep. However, he had something that he needed to do.

He still hadn’t-

“How indecent!”

At that precise moment, Yatogami Kuroh exclaimed from his position on the sofa, arms and legs crossed. It seemed like his indignation had finally surpassed its limit.

“What sort of obscene place is this?!”

He finally stood up with a clenched fist.

And if it was even possible, Yashiro’s smile grew even more bitter.

“In the first place, why do we have to hide in this-this-...”

It seems like Kuroh simply can’t bear to speak the words ‘love hotel’ out loud. Blushing slightly, he said, “The sort of place used for clandestine love affairs!”

There’s a clear disjoint between the current era and his choice of words. Yashiro sat up swiftly, and leaned against the back of the bed.

“Isn’t this typical for people on the run? There really aren’t that many other places in a city where you can remain anonymous and enjoy undisturbed privacy. There’s no way they’ll ask everyone who comes here to show identification, after all. It’s a perfect spot for people like us who need to keep our heads low.”

“What I wanted to point out was-!”

Kuroh said, his conscientious nature showing itself.

“How unwholesome this place is!”

“Well, what can I say.”

A vulgar smile appeared on Yashiro’s face as he recalled his “friend”, Mishina.

Mishina would probably brush it off in such a fashion.

“Considering the kind of things that are to be done here, wholesomeness is a little bit too much to ask, don’t you think?”

“No!”

Kuroh immediately shook his head, and continued with a blush, “I-I don’t intend to criticize such kinds of actions. They are simply part of the workings of human society, and not something to be denied. What I do think is problematic is the business model of the hotel itself. In other words, how we’re able to get in here with no trouble at all!”

This love hotel runs on an automated payment system, and one can enjoy the hotel’s benefits without ever having to come face to face with another human being.

Upon seeing the the perplexed expression on Yashiro’s face, Kuroh clarified himself somewhat irritably.

“We were obviously a group of three!”

“..ah, I see. So that’s what you’re onto.”

There was a security camera at the entrance of the hotel. There probably is someone checking the video footage. Regardless of how automated the system can get, it’s not like there’s no manager in the building at all. Wary of capture at the hands of SCEPTER4, they disguised themselves to some degree and made use of Neko’s powers for camouflaging purposes, but they couldn’t really fake the number of people.

“Well, in these kind of places, combinations like two guys and a girl aren’t as rare as you think.”

“How indecent!”

“I wonder what sort of play that would involve?”

Yashiro laughed nonchalantly as he felt the full force of Kuroh’s glare. At that moment, a cheery voice sounded from the bathroom.

“Hey, hey, Shiro! There’s this weird button! Look!”

The moment Yashiro and Kuroh turned their eyes towards the direction of the sound, the wall of the bathroom turned transparent. They could see Neko inside, looking cheerful while surrounded by a cloak of bubbles.

“See!”

Every time she pressed the button, the wall turned transparent, and Neko in her birthday suit flickered in and out of sight.

Seems like it was a questionable device to showcase people taking a bath.

“Yay!”

Looking like she was enjoying herself, Neko stood up in joy and spun around. Her long hair barely covered the most important parts of her naked body.

Yashiro and Kuroh spoke up at the same time.

“Stop it!”

“Do you mind?!”

“Meow?”

The moment Neko froze up in the middle of twisting her body, the wall returned to normal.